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ABSTRACT

The key features of student achievement were examined at twelve sixth form colleges (SFCs) in the United Kingdom with an emphasis on strategies to maintain and improve performance. It was found that students at SFCs have on average higher prior attainment and suffer less deprivation than their counterparts in General Further Education and Tertiary Colleges. Although SFCs had high levels of student retention, there was concern about low grade point averages. These were among key success factors for SFCs: (1) overall commitment of college administration and staff to student achievement; (2) college-wide strategic planning for review and assessment; (3) intensive student recruitment, placement, and orientation; (4) updated and evolving curriculum and delivery systems; (5) attention to tutorial and other student support services; and 6) rigorous teaching and course review. The study concluded that although SFCs make a major and distinctive contribution to post-16 education, individual institutions vary significantly due to increasingly divergent student populations who have lower levels of prior academic achievement and no family tradition of higher education goals. (There are 23 tables and figures. The bibliography lists 19 references. Appended are a list of colleges that participated in the study and a checklist for consultant visits to colleges). (AJ)

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Rising to the challenge

Widening participation and raising achievement in sixth form colleges

Peter Davies

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Widening participation and raising achievement in sixth form colleges

Peter Davies

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Preface and acknowledgements

The research project that this report concerns was undertaken as part of the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme, sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Work on the project commenced in July 2001.

The report aims to identify the key features of student achievement at sixth form colleges, with a view to informing strategies to maintain and improve their performance. It complements the earlier report *Closing the achievement gap: colleges making a difference* (Davies 2001) by extending that general study of influences on student achievement in the college sector to focus specifically on the circumstances of sixth form colleges.

In undertaking this work, the Learning and Skills Development Agency acknowledges the considerable assistance received from the managements and staff of the participating colleges. Without their help this report would not have been possible. We are also most grateful to Alkemygold Ltd for the use of aggregated data from the A-level Performance System database.

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Summary of findings

The contribution of sixth form colleges

- Sixth form colleges (SFCs) make a major and distinctive contribution to post-16 education, especially at Level 3 where they prepare a substantial number of young people for entry to university.
- In many colleges, there is growing diversity in the curriculum, including a greater choice of vocational courses, provision at Levels 1 and 2, and short courses for adults.
- At most SFCs, students have on average higher prior attainment and suffer less deprivation than their counterparts in General Further Education and Tertiary Colleges (GFEC/TCs). All, however, face the challenges of widening participation as the proportion of students who aim to qualify at Level 3 and then enter university continues to rise.
- A minority of SFCs have curriculum and student profiles that have more in common with some GFEC/TCs than with most other SFCs. A few have student bodies with indicators of deprivation as acute as any GFEC/TC.
- In general, SFCs are characterised by the quality of their informal mechanisms of internal communication and the good levels of morale among both students and staff.

Retention and achievement performance

- Retention and achievement rates at SFCs are generally higher than those for other types of college. The gap between the highest and lowest rates across SFCs is also relatively narrower.
- In recent years, the spread of overall retention rates across SFCs has converged considerably towards the higher levels of retention.
- There appears to be little correlation between student demography – including indicators of deprivation – and overall rates of retention and achievement. This suggests that there could be scope for some improvement in the case of those colleges with rates below the current median.
- At Level 3 the major concern of SFCs is the specific grades that students achieve in AS/A2 levels and AVCEs on completion. Here, there exists a clear relationship between prior attainment measured in GCSE points scores, and achievement on completion expressed in UCAS points scores – the basis of the value-added systems that are employed widely within SFCs.

- There are wide differences between SFCs in the average UCAS points scores achieved by their students. In the main, this reflects the wide differences in the average GCSE scores of their intakes. The latter are negatively correlated with measures of deprivation.

Value-added performance

- There are significant differences in the relative value-added performance of SFCs. Some with apparently unimpressive UCAS points scores in fact deliver high levels of value-added. Others that are well up the School and College Performance Tables based on the 'raw' results display value-added performances significantly below the median.

Scope for improvement

- The large majority SFCs perform at least adequately in the progress that their students make at Level 3. In the lower quartile, though, the data suggests that value-added performance should be notably better than it is at present – especially in the 10% or so of SFCs with the lowest value-added scores.
- The middle 50% of SFCs in terms of value-added scores could raise their performance to that of the top quartile by an improvement that broadly equates to securing one grade higher than at present in around a third of their examination entries.
- Many colleges have one or two subject areas where value-added performance is persistently lower than others in relation to the national profiles for the subject areas concerned. In these cases, greater sharing of best practice from similar subject disciplines that achieve better results may enable improvements to be made.
- The main challenges in raising value-added scores lie in improving the achievement rates and raising the UCAS points scores of students whose performance at GCSE is at the threshold for entrance to Level 3 programmes.
- At some SFCs, significant numbers of students with low GCSE scores fail to pass one or more of the subjects for which they are entered, or are excluded from entry altogether, while their counterparts in other SFCs obtain three pass grades.
- There is conflicting evidence on the extent to which colleges' value-added scores might be adversely affected by the enrolment of higher than average numbers of disadvantaged students. At institutional level, there are no correlations sufficient to explain the variations in value-added that exist. Other researchers have found evidence that weaker students on

entry perform slightly better at colleges where the majority of students have above average prior attainment.

Key success factors

- Evidence from investigations in a sample of 12 SFCs indicates that the key characteristics of effectiveness in raising and maintaining student achievement are as listed below.

Overall commitment

- A clear commitment at senior management level to the delivery of high levels of student achievement, with active involvement of the governing body in setting targets and reviewing progress against them.
- The establishment of clear, challenging but realistic achievement targets for students and for course/subject areas.
- Effective communication to college staff of expectations about student achievement, and the associated targets.
- High morale, with both staff and students feeling that they are valued.
- An emphasis on continual improvement, supported by clear accountability.
- A concentration on maximising the capabilities of students, rather than on factors in their home background and prior attainment that might inhibit achievement.

College-wide strategies

- Rigorous course review and self-assessment procedures, with the active involvement of curriculum leaders and course teams.
- Follow-up action plans, designed to address problem areas and meet targets.
- Regular monitoring of retention and achievement, with clear accountability.
- A feed-through from course review into pedagogic and tutorial practice, supported by related staff development.
- Involvement of parents in the review of students' progress.

Recruitment, placement and induction

- Effective communication of the curriculum offer course requirements and progression opportunities via a range of media.
- Close and constructive links with feeder schools.
- Clear entry criteria, with an emphasis on inclusiveness.

- Individual diagnosis of students' academic potential, and their needs for learning and pastoral support.
- The availability of 'taster' sessions and associated strategies to assist students to make early-stage course transfers when appropriate.
- Well-planned induction programmes, with clearly explained but challenging expectations of what will be required from students on their courses.
- Early and effective support to improve students' independent study skills, wherever necessary.
- Attention to the selection and training of staff involved in student recruitment, enrolment and induction.

Curriculum development and delivery

- Adaptation of the curriculum portfolio to support widened participation in line with mission including, where appropriate, the broadening of vocational opportunities at Levels 1 and 2, and provision for adult students.
- Commitment to concepts of inclusive learning with differentiated approaches to the needs of individual learners.
- A proactive approach to encouraging the take-up of additional learning support by those who require it.
- High expectations of students, supported by good teacher–student relationships.
- An emphasis on the opportunities presented by Curriculum 2000 for the improvement of student achievement and progression.
- Review and adjustment of the timetable, taking account of students' learning needs and out-of-college commitments.

Tutorial and other support

- Regular review of students' academic progress and personal circumstances, on an individual basis as well as in groups.
- Rigorous use of value-added systems, both to assess the minimum grades expected from each student, and to review the performance across subject areas and courses.
- Setting target grades taking into account the typical achievement of equivalent students at SFCs with the highest value-added scores.
- Sensitive use of value-added data with individual students, so as to secure their full motivation to maximise their potential.
- Close links between tutorial and teaching staff, and between academic and pastoral support systems.
- Structures that facilitate and ensure referral to flexible systems of additional learning and personal support.

- Careful selection and effective training of staff with tutorial responsibilities.

Teaching and pedagogy

- Rigorous course review procedures, with active involvement of teaching staff.
- Belief that teaching and learning strategies have a significant impact on student achievement.
- Commitment to inclusive learning, with development of differentiated approaches to teaching and learning support, and an emphasis on students' independent study skills.
- Systematic procedures for lesson observation, linked to appraisal and tailored programmes of staff development.
- Sharing of effective practice, via meetings, working groups and staff development programmes.

Monitoring, evaluation and follow-up

- Management information systems (MIS) capable of providing accurate and up-to-date information on retention and achievement.
- Readily available online access to MIS on the part of managers and teaching staff.
- Commitment to high levels of attendance and punctuality, with immediate follow-up of unexplained absence.
- Emphasis on student obligations as well as entitlements.
- Early identification of problems manifested in absence and/or backlogs in coursework, with timely follow-up and remedial support.
- Involvement of parents and other family members in sustaining student commitment.
- Student feedback sought regularly and systematically, with effective communication of results and follow-up action.

1. Background and aims of the project

The establishment and development of sixth form colleges[1]

Sixth form colleges (SFCs) play an important and distinctive role within English further education, comprising 105 of the 426 colleges within the responsibility of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). There is also one SFC in Scotland, and one in Wales. Since the establishment of the first in the 1960s, they expanded and developed rapidly and in recent years, as we shall see in Section 3, they have continued to increase their enrolments at a rate faster than the average for the sector.

Generally speaking, the main reason for the establishment of SFCs has been that educational benefit would result from the concentration in one establishment of 16–19-year-old students served by a broad, mainly academic curriculum offer delivered by specialist staff. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) also perceived them to be attractive because they were a more cost-effective option than the continued maintenance of a number of smaller school sixth forms. As their name suggests, most began by offering a somewhat wider choice within the curriculum traditionally provided at the time by school sixth forms. For some SFCs, an elitist heritage was inevitable, reinforced by the fact that a number occupied the buildings of former grammar schools.

The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 proved highly significant for SFCs by incorporating them into a common sector with General Further Education and Tertiary Colleges (GFEC/TCs), institutions that hitherto had been administered quite separately, and had experienced different origins and traditions. At the time, SFCs had relatively higher unit costs per student. The funding framework they now encountered required unit costs to converge downwards over time, and also included incentives to increase enrolments, and disincentives to reduce or merely maintain them. The transition took place amid a continuing rise in staying-on rates post-16. This trend was fuelled by governmental desires to reduce significantly the proportion of the population who ceased to engage in education or training beyond leaving school, and to increase the numbers of young people who sought entry to higher education.

It is clear that the large majority of SFCs met the challenge of Incorporation successfully, though their overall numbers have reduced since 1992 – from 117, mainly as a result of mergers with GFEC/TCs – and many have had to adjust their profile quite significantly in order to survive and flourish. Some signalled the significance of the change by dropping the words 'sixth form' from their titles, though most appeared to reason that there was more to be lost than to be gained from this step. Many enrolled more adult students. All tended to recruit higher proportions than before of school-leavers whose

[1] For a comprehensive review of the current nature of the sixth form college sector, readers are recommended to refer to Lumby *et al.* (2002).

counterparts of 10 or more years ago would not have continued with their studies beyond 16. Inevitably, the profile of this new type of intake included a higher than average proportion of students from deprived backgrounds, with lower levels of prior attainment and without a family tradition of study towards qualifications at Level 3 or above. Despite these changes, evidence suggested that many young people continued to view SFCs as more desirable and prestigious places to study than schools and GFEC/TCs (Keys and Maychell 1998).

Pressures to improve student retention and achievement

Concurrently with the emphasis on widening participation came a renewed stress from the then Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) on the improvement of standards, characterised by an increase in the rates of student retention and achievement. The FEFC's funding mechanism had always contained financial incentives to these ends. From the second round onwards, colleges were also unable to gain good grades at inspection if their rates of retention and achievement were below the average for comparable institutions.

Taken overall, SFCs already exhibited average rates of retention and achievement above those of other types of institution, which in part may have reflected their distinctive student profiles, as outlined in Section 3. They also continued to do so as, along with the rest of the college sector, their response to the drive to improve standards resulted in gradual improvements, especially where retention was concerned. This pattern of performance was reflected in the grades awarded at inspection, which in most cases were also above the average for the FE sector as a whole.

Adoption and use of value-added systems

A significant contribution to the raising of student achievement appears to have resulted from the introduction of more student-focused approaches to the setting of targets (Martinez 2001). These developments have been associated with the availability of systems of value-added that have allowed targets to be set for students' performance in A/AS levels and, to a lesser extent, in AGNVQs, based on correlations with their attainment in GCSEs. Many SFCs have been in the forefront of the adoption of these systems, which have enabled the introduction of a more rigorous and individually tailored approach to formative assessment.

The most widely used value-added systems for measuring performance between Level 2 and Level 3 that practitioners and managers have access to are the system piloted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2000, ALPS (A-level Performance System) established at Greenhead College, and ALIS (A-level Information System) established at Durham University. All

value-added systems convert qualification grades on entry and on completion into numerical scores. ALIS calculations are carried out on a subject basis, using a different formula to predict grades for each subject. While the DfES and ALPS systems provide subject-specific data, they do not provide targets for individual subjects, preferring to provide students with overall grade targets. At present there are no robust value-added systems for Level 3 vocational courses other than for AGNVQs. There is no evidence that other vocational qualifications can be treated in the same way (LSC 2002). In this project we have made use of statistics drawn from the ALPS database. Further details of the methodology concerned are provided in Section 2, with the outcomes of the analysis presented in Section 3.

Role and performance

Since the advent of a Labour government in 1997, policy arguably became more favourable to the role of SFCs. There has been a new emphasis on the need for greater coherence in the 14–19 curriculum (DfES 2002). From time to time there has also been official encouragement for the 'sixth form' environment as being most likely to produce high standards for 16–19 year olds – an important consideration given the ultimate aim of securing university entry for 50% of the age cohort at 18+. This has even taken the form of support for the establishment of 'sixth form centres' in GFEC/TCs, though the evidence of the positive impact of those already in existence was distinctly ambiguous (Morris, Davies and Bromley 1999). Conversely, the increased freedom allowed to the schools sector to open sixth forms where none exist at present, and the political difficulties inherent in reorganisations that involve closures of school sixth forms, have provided disincentives towards the establishment of new SFCs. As yet, it remains too early to judge how, if at all, the transfer of school sixth forms to the learning and skills sector will affect the prospects for any expansion in the numbers of SFCs.

Despite their generally better performance in terms of student achievement compared with other types of colleges, many SFC principals and governing bodies were concerned about the basis on which judgements about them were formed. Though many SFCs were prominent at the head of the list of colleges and state schools in the annually published School and College Performance Tables, they occupied a generally subordinate position to many independent schools. As the proponents of SFCs pointed out – with some justice, as we shall see in Section 3 – when their results were set against the typically wider ability and socio-economic range of their intake, they frequently represented significantly greater added value.

Similarly, within the ranks of SFCs there was concern that comparisons of 'raw' results tended to disguise relative differences in the ability and social background of student intakes. Since concepts of value-added did not appear to be understood widely by the media and the general public, this became a contentious issue, especially where catchment areas overlapped. In such instances, an SFC with a higher position in the performance table tended to enjoy the greater public prestige, even though in some cases the order would

have been reversed had ranking been undertaken on the basis of value-added.

There were particular worries in the minority of SFCs whose profiles in terms of curriculum and student demography had as much in common with some GFEC/TCs as with most of the other SFCs. Comparisons with the latter for benchmarking and target setting purposes were viewed as unhelpful and disadvantageous. As we shall see in Section 3, for some SFCs it is fair to say that there are very few comparator colleges among the others of their type. Some managers and staff also suspected that the impact of prior attainment operated disproportionately – that it was easier to stretch students with lower GCSE scores in colleges and classes where the average ability range was significantly above the national average, and, conversely, that it was more difficult to do so when the average was well below. In the latter case, the situation was perceived as being compounded by a typically greater incidence of deprivation, English not being the language of the home, and the lack of any family tradition of study towards qualifications at Level 3 and above.

Gestation of project

Managements and staff of SFCs have appeared no less keen than those at other colleges to absorb advice and guidance on effective practice in raising student achievement. While useful in general terms, it has been pointed out that most of the evidence on which such guidance has been based has been drawn from GFEC/TCs, including the bulk of that which informed the publication that this one is intended to complement (Davies 2001). A more specific focus on the distinctive circumstances of SFCs was therefore requested.

With this in mind, the LSDA commissioned a research project aimed at:

- identifying the nature of differences between SFCs in terms of student achievement
- assessing the degree to which demographic differences in their student intakes are linked with relative achievement rates
- undertaking value-added comparisons of student achievements at different SFCs
- identifying aspects of local contexts, institutional ethos and institutional practices that influence student achievement
- assisting SFCs in benchmarking performance and in identifying areas for improvement and remedial action.

The methodologies adopted to fulfil these aims are set out in Section 2 of the report. Section 3 summarises the findings arising from the desk research data analysis element of the project. Sections 4–10 then outline the outcomes of primary research of practice at a sample of SFCs.

Lastly, we should note that the project took place at an early stage of the implementation of Curriculum 2000, before the first cohort of students had

completed the second year of their courses. Inevitably, therefore, the statistical data that we draw upon relates to the earlier pattern of qualifications. And though in Section 7 we note a range of perceptions of the impact of this reform, its advantages and drawbacks, it is as yet too early to judge any longer-term effect on patterns of student participation and achievement.

2. Methodology

The project comprised two main elements – desk research of quantitative data concerning the performance of SFCs in relation to student achievement, and primary research of mainly qualitative evidence gathered from a sample of 12 SFCs.

Desk research

The desk research element was based largely on a study of the recruitment, retention and achievement data published by the LSC, including data from the Individualised Student Record (ISR). Except where stated otherwise, the figures quoted are taken from the 1999/00 ISR, the most up-to-date fully audited data set at the time of writing. Analysis concentrated on an investigation of the patterns of student achievement, and the extent to which they could be explained by relative variations in the student profiles of different SFCs. Focus in the latter area was primarily upon students' prior attainment (measured in average GCSE points scores) and relative deprivation (based on the percentage of each SFC's enrolments that qualified for the so-called widening participation (WP) uplift in funding).

Evidence was also examined of SFCs' record in adding value to the students they enrolled, given the central importance to the SFC sector of achievements at Level 3 where, as we noted in Section 1, there exist relatively robust methodologies to measure value-added. Our analysis was based on statistics up to and including those for 2001 drawn from 98 SFCs in the ALPS database. As with other systems of value-added, ALPS compares input data in the form of a GCSE score for each student (A* = 8 points, A = 7 points, B = 6 points, C = 5 points, etc) with output data in the form of UCAS points scores (for A-levels, A = 10 points, B = 8 points, C = 6 points, etc; for AGNVQs, distinction = 18 points, merit = 12 points; pass = 6 points). An added value index (AVI) is then calculated from a database of over 200,000 A-levels/AGNVQs taken by 73,000 students in 98 SFCs in 2000 and 2001. Only students who have sat at least two A-levels or equivalent were included and, in our analysis, the AVI excludes A-level General Studies.

An AVI of 1.0 indicates a performance equalling that of the college at the boundary of the top quartile. An AVI above 1.0 indicates performance within the top quartile of achievement. The score of the median college is 0.96.

In practice, value-added scores differ by subject area and by gender. Overall institutional scores are therefore affected by the relative gender profiles and subject take-up of the student cohorts concerned. On average, in most subjects females enter studies at Level 3 with higher GCSE scores than males. They also record higher average UCAS points scores than males on completion. However, on average males progress more than females between Levels 2 and 3, and so their value-added scores are higher than females in most subjects.

Though ALPS and the other established systems for measuring value-added are based on student-level data, care must be taken when comparing institutions on the basis of average or aggregate data. Distortions can be introduced as a result of relative differences in student profiles as outlined above, and for other reasons connected with the margins of statistical error (Goldstein 2001). However, we believe that the main conclusions that we have reached from the analysis of the data described in Section 3 have taken these issues into account, and are therefore not significantly affected by them.

Primary research at a sample of SFCs

Twelve SFCs cooperated in the primary research phase of the project. They were selected so as to include a range of types of catchment area and student profiles, but with the deliberate intention of including a majority who faced the particular challenges of a multi-ethnic student profile with levels of deprivation above the average for SFCs. Four consultants undertook the fieldwork, each working with three colleges. Statistical details of the SFCs concerned are listed in Tables 1.1 and 1.2, grouped as visited by the consultants, and the colleges are described in Appendix 1.

A briefing meeting was held involving the consultants and representatives of the participating colleges in January 2002. Each college was then visited twice during the period February–April 2002. Members of the senior management teams, curriculum managers, teaching staff and students were interviewed, following a semi-structured approach based on a standard checklist of questions to ensure consistency (see Appendix 2). Relevant documentation was also examined before and after each visit, including inspection reports, strategic plans, retention and achievement policies, and value-added systems. Detailed reports on each college, indicating practices and systems that appeared to have the most influence on student achievement, were discussed and synthesised.

Sections 4–10 of the report set out the findings arising from this phase of the project under headings equivalent to those employed to group the questions asked by the LSDA's consultants during their visits to the 12 colleges concerned, namely:

- background, mission and ethos
- strategies for maintaining and raising achievement
- student recruitment, placement and induction
- curriculum development
- tutorial systems and other support systems
- teaching and pedagogy
- monitoring, evaluation and follow-up.

A summary of key characteristics of effective performance is provided at the end of each section.

3. Recruitment, retention and achievement

Profile of enrolments

In 2000/01, SFCs catered for some 216,000 students, 5.7% of the total enrolments in FE sector colleges (Table 2). These numbers represented a growth rate that had been considerably more pronounced than the average for the sector (47.2% over the period since 1994/5, compared to 24.2% overall, see Table 3).

The profile of SFC enrolments is characterised by relatively higher proportions than the FE average of younger learners, studying full-time and enrolled at Level 3. Over 125,000 of SFC students were enrolled on full-time courses, representing 58.1% of SFC recruitment (compared with 25.1% for further education overall) – 13.2% of the full-time total for the sector. Some 55% were aged 16–18, as against 18.4% of the sector as a whole. And 58.9% were studying towards qualifications at Level 3, compared with 24.6% overall (Tables 2 and 4).

We should make some provisos regarding the overall figures, as the position differs from one SFC to another – sometimes considerably – and the picture is changing over time. Since Incorporation, part-time numbers in SFCs have increased at a faster rate than full-time – albeit from a much lower base – a trend that has continued in the most recent years for which data is available (Table 5). And although the median proportion of SFC students enrolled on courses leading to qualifications below Level 3 is only 8.5%, and almost a quarter of SFCs have fewer than 5%, some 11% of them enrolled between 25 and 50% of their students on courses below Level 3.

In practice, SFCs cater for a much more diverse range of learners than is suggested by some stereotypes of this type of college. Until the most recent year for which data is available, the proportion of students at SFCs who lived in deprived areas (as indicated by their eligibility for the WP uplift in funding to colleges) was only slightly below the average for the FE sector (Figure 1). The median proportion of WP uplift students in SFCs was 18%. Although some 29% of SFCs had fewer than 10% of their students who qualified for the uplift, 20% had between 25 and 50%, and 13% over 50%. A significant minority of SFCs is also very diverse ethnically. Some 12% drew between 25 and 50% of their enrolments from ethnic minorities, and 11% drew over 50%. These figures compare with an SFC median of 6.5% ethnic minority enrolments, with well over a third of SFCs enrolling fewer than 5%.

In terms of resourcing, SFCs' average level of funding per learner (ALF) of £17.06 was only just above both the average for the sector (+0.7%) and that for GFEC/TCs (+1.1%). Given the greater proportions of students enrolled on more resource-intensive vocational courses at the latter types of institution, it is arguable that, at the very least, the relative ALFs should be reversed. Conversely, it could be claimed that the generally larger GFEC/TCs could be expected to take advantage of greater economies of scale than those that are open to SFCs. A greater bone of contention, though, is the larger gap in ALF

that exists between colleges and schools (in favour of the latter), though the DfES calculates that its size is more modest than that claimed by the Association of Colleges (AoC).

Retention and achievement

Mean rates of achievement for SFCs were significantly above both those for GFEC/TCs and for the sector overall. The mean retention rates of full-time students in SFCs were also relatively better, though those of part-timers were significantly below average (Table 5).

If the retention and achievement data is broken down further, by examining the range of SFC performance across the qualification levels, further exceptions appear to the otherwise positive pattern. Mean retention and achievement rates for 16–18 year olds at all levels are generally high, and relatively better in SFCs than they are in GFEC/TCs. At Levels 2 and 3 they are also consistently higher across the full range of performance (ie at the 10th, 25th 75th and 90th percentiles and at the median). However, at Level 1 the retention and achievement rates of the 16–18 age group at SFCs below the median are lower relative to those in the equivalent range of GFEC/TCs.

The position with regard to adult students (aged 19+) appears much less impressive. At all levels the mean retention rate is relatively lower than that in GFEC/TCs. At Level 3 and above the mean achievement rate is also relatively lower. In the main these patterns reflect the relatively lower rates of 19+ retention and achievement displayed by SFCs at and below the median, compared with the equivalent range of GFEC/TCs (Tables 6.1–6.4).[2] However, this data needs to be treated with caution. Many SFCs have very small numbers of 19+ students, and retention rates can be adversely distorted by 19 and 20 year olds who return to college for a third year to take repeat modules in January to improve their grades, and then leave once these are completed.

Where A/AS levels were concerned, SFCs delivered a slightly higher number of entries than GFEC/TCs, and just over a quarter of those in schools. Overall pass rates were slightly lower than for schools, but notably better than in GFEC/TCs (Table 7).

It is questionable whether overall achievement data of this type tells us much that is helpful about the actual performance of SFCs in maximising the achievement of their students. As we have seen, the profile of student enrolments at SFCs tends to be considerably different from that at GFEC/TCs,

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[2] The LSC employs two separate definitions of retention and achievement. The data contained in Table 5 is extracted from the LSC's *Summary statistics for further education institutions* publication (LSC 2001c). Here, retention rates are calculated in-year, including partial achievement, but excluding learners on courses spanning more than one academic year who drop out before the commencement of the second or subsequent years. Tables 6.1–6.4 are drawn from the LSC's *Benchmarking data 1997/98 to 1999/2000* (LSC 2001a). In this case, retention rates also include learners who withdrew before their final year, but exclude partial achievements.

and there are also some distinctive variations between individual SFCs. Furthermore, the paramount importance of Level 3 provision for SFCs means that they have major concerns with the actual grades obtained, rather than just with the overall rates of achievement, since grades dictate the offers of university entrance – the primary goal of many of the students.

Value-added

As we have described already in Sections 1 and 2, systems of value-added have been widely used in SFCs, and in other institutions, to set individual student target grades at A-levels/AGNVQs, based on GCSE attainment on entry. Value-added methodology can also provide the basis for a more meaningful investigation of the relative effectiveness of institutions in maximising the grades obtained by learners studying towards these qualifications, though some caution must be exercised when making comparisons on the basis of data aggregated at the level of the institution, rather than that of the individual student.

Within the ALPS database, the most recently available figures indicated that across SFCs there was a spread of A-level/AGNVQ achievement expressed in average UCAS points scores per subject of 4.0–7.1 (median 5.5; mean 5.4). The equivalent ALPS value-added index scores ranged from 0.73 to 1.16 (median and mean 0.95) (Figure 2). The value-added index scores are derived from the relationship between SFCs' average GCSE scores per student on entry, and the average UCAS points scores per subject eventually obtained (Figure 3). The positive correlation that results is the basis for value-added methodologies.[3] (The correlation is somewhat stronger if average points score per student is used as the output measure, as those with the better GCSE scores tend to be entered for more subjects, and so raise the ceiling of their maximum potential UCAS points score.) The positive correlation between the value-added index scores and average UCAS points scores is to be expected, given that high index scores indicate student achievement at a level above that which would normally be predicted on the basis of average GCSE scores. Across SFCs, the latter range from 4 to 6.6 (median and mean 5.7).

As might be expected, also, there is only a very weak correlation between the value-added index and average GCSE scores (Figure 4). (Note that if every SFC attained average UCAS points scores exactly at the level predicted on the basis of the average GCSE scores of their intakes, each would have an identical value-added index score, which would thus not vary at all with differences in GCSE scores.)

Table 8.1 displays a more detailed breakdown of ALPS data. Average GCSE scores per student on entry are shown in 10 bands. For each band, the

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[3] The figures display the correlation coefficient (R), the proportion of variance in common between the two variables concerned (R^2), and the regression coefficient equation. A perfect correlation is indicated when R = 1.

average UCAS points per subject then obtained is recorded at a range of percentiles, from the highest achieving college in the data set to the lowest. Beneath the average UCAS points scores an indication is given of the A-level grades that would typically correspond. So, for example, a student with a GCSE Score of 6.7–<7.0 at the middle ranking college in that band scored 7.63 UCAS points per subject, equivalent to A-level grades BBB/BBC.

When the prior attainment of the intake is taken account of in this way, inter-institutional differences appear considerably narrower than they do on the basis of overall average UCAS points per subject. There is not a vast difference between colleges at the 25th and 75th percentiles – between around a quarter and three-fifths of a grade per subject, depending on GCSE score band. Between the 10th and 90th percentiles, though, the difference ranges from just over half to almost one grade per subject (Table 8.2). In practice SFCs with the highest levels of student achievement by band are taking students with GCSE grades such as four Cs, one D and four Es (ie below the level at which many colleges and schools allow admission to A-level programmes) and enabling them to achieve grades DDD or better at A-level. This evidence also suggests that a clear majority of SFCs achieved results equivalent to those for students with the same levels of prior attainment who attended the top selective independent schools. Within the smaller sample of schools and GFEC/TCs in the ALPS database, the lower value-added index scores are below those recorded by the equivalent percentile of SFCs.

Table 9 then breaks down the latest ALPS data to display the range of value-added index scores across SFCs by the 42 most commonly offered A-level subjects and six AGNVQ programme areas. In the table, the value-added index score for each subject/programme area is calculated against the aspirational benchmark scores of a college performing at the boundary of the top quartile.

The table shows that the relative profiles of value-added across the range of SFC performance differed considerably by subject area. In general, the GNVQ qualifications exhibited the higher scores. A-level value-added scores for individual subjects vary according to the range of grades awarded, with French and German being examples of two of the most difficult subjects for students to gain good grades.

Within each subject area there is relatively little difference between the performance of the SFCs at the 75th and 25th percentiles. In all but 11 cases the variation represents less than an A-level grade (roughly speaking, each 0.3 difference in the value-added index score equates to a variation of one grade). For a college to raise its performance from the 25th percentile to a level equating to that at the 75th would require an increase of one grade in the results of 30% of its examination entries. However, a student at the wrong end of the spectrum in terms of A/AGNVQ results is around three grades worse off per subject than her/his counterpart in the highest achieving subject departments.

Relationship between student profiles and achievement

Further analysis was undertaken to investigate the extent to which the pattern of inter-institutional student achievement outlined above was connected with relative variations in the profiles of the different student bodies, as opposed to the performance of the SFCs themselves.

Relative deprivation appeared to play some part in influencing student outcomes, as measured by the proportions of students who qualified for the WP uplift. There was a negative association between the latter and both full-time retention rates and long course achievement rates. Broadly speaking, the 'lines of best fit' indicated that for each additional 10% of WP uplift students, retention rates were about four percentage points lower, and achievement rates around nine percentage points lower. However, in both cases there was only a weak correlation – virtually non-existent at the lower end of the spread of achievement rates (Figures 5 and 6).

Where A-levels/AGNVQs were concerned, as we have seen there was a positive correlation between GCSE scores and UCAS points scores. Since there was also a negative association between the former and the relative proportions of WP uplift students (Figure 7), it follows that average UCAS points per subject tend to be lower in SFCs with the larger proportions of such students (Figure 8). In the latter case, however, the correlation was much weaker. There was no relationship between the proportions of WP uplift students and the ALPS value-added index ($R = 0.1900$; $R^2 = 0.0361$). Of the 13 SFCs with more than 50% of students in the WP uplift category, only three had ALPS value-added index scores that were clearly below the mean. An equal number had scores that were clearly above.

Analysis of the data by ethnicity revealed a similar pattern of relationships to those relating to relative deprivation as outlined above. Generally speaking, SFCs with higher proportions of students drawn from ethnic minorities tended to be those with the lower average GCSE and UCAS points scores, though the pattern differed somewhat by specific ethnic grouping, and the correlations were generally lower throughout than was the case with the proportions of WP uplift students. Here again there was no overall relationship with the ALPS value-added index score ($R = 0.0781$; $R^2 = 0.0061$).

Reliable and readily obtainable data does not exist that would have enabled us to investigate the possible links between patterns of achievement and proportions of students from family backgrounds with no tradition of qualification attainment at Level 3 and above. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that such individuals would have been present in relatively larger proportions among WP uplift students than among other enrolments. It appears unlikely, therefore, that this issue could have had an impact on SFCs to an extent capable of explaining more than a very small amount of the inter-institutional variation in value-added.

Neither was there any indication that SFCs are sacrificing student retention rates in order to maximise the achievement of those students who remained on course. In general, colleges with the highest rates of student achievement

also displayed high retention rates. There was only a very weak correlation between student retention rates and ALPS value-added index scores ($R = 0.2379$; $R^2 = 0.0566$).

Lastly, there was also no sign that indicators of student achievement at A-level were adversely affected by students being entered for more subjects than they could cope with. There was no correlation between the average number of A-levels taken per student in SFCs and either their average UCAS points scores per subject or their ALPS value-added index scores.

Since value-added methodologies take account of the level of prior attainment of students, there did not, therefore, appear to be any clearly discernible impact on achievement of demographic factors such as deprivation beyond that which affected the relative GCSE score profiles of their intakes. Once adjustments were made for students' different starting points, there was no evidence in the data that the degree of value that SFCs could add in terms of maximising achievement potential was significantly inhibited by the relative profiles of the students they recruited. We should note, however, that there is some research evidence from the schools sector that students in establishments where the average GCSE scores on entry to Level 3 were high tended to make slightly better progress than their counterparts elsewhere (Yang and Woodhouse 2001).

4. Background, mission and ethos

Catchment area and student profile

The sample of colleges that participated in Stage 2 of the project was deliberately selected so as to include a higher than average proportion serving deprived areas (see Table 1.1). All but two recruited more than 24% of their students from WP uplift postcodes – six more than 50%. In the case of eight of the colleges, more than 40% of their students were drawn from ethnic minorities (three more than 80%). Five enrolled between a fifth and a third of their students onto courses towards qualifications below Level 3, and only two had proportions of enrolments below Level 3 that were less than the median for SFCs. Even in the case of College B, where very few students qualified for the WP uplift, unemployment in the area was higher than the regional average and 50% of households had an income of less than £15,000 per annum.

Generally speaking, colleges within the sample with high proportions of WP uplift students also had percentages of ethnic minority students that were well above the average for SFCs. Exceptions were Colleges C, I and K, which had predominantly white student profiles of medium (C and I) or high deprivation (K), and Colleges G, H and L, where ethnic minority student populations of over 40% were combined with medium (G and L) or low deprivation (H).

The breakdown of ethnic minority student populations differed considerably across those colleges where their proportions were well above average. At colleges H, J and L they were comprised predominantly of students of Indian ancestry; at College G, too, Indian students were the largest ethnic minority group, but there were also significant numbers from Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds. In the case of College D, the main ethnic minority groups were Black African and Black Caribbean. At College F, students from a Pakistani background formed the largest single ethnic grouping, but there were also significant numbers of those with Black African and Black Caribbean ancestry. Colleges A and E were the most ethnically diverse, though in both cases students from a Pakistani background formed the largest single grouping. At Colleges G and J, the proportion of ethnic minority students had increased notably in recent years.

Colleges D and H are Roman Catholic SFCs but, nonetheless, both welcomed students from other Christian denominations and from other religious faiths. In neither case was a majority of the students Catholic, and the Roman Catholic ethos that was prominent within their missions and values was viewed by managers and staff as a positive attraction to many young people from other backgrounds and, in particular, to their parents. Both these institutions drew students from a very wide area.

Given the proportions of students from deprived backgrounds, it was not surprising that managers and staff who were interviewed at most of the participating colleges referred to increasing problems arising from the lack of any tradition of study towards advanced qualifications within the families of many of their students. In these cases there was evidence of low expectations

and aspirations on the part of the students concerned and their parents. The nature of some students' homes effectively limited their space and support for self-study outside college. Interviewees at Colleges B, E and J also referred specifically to the long hours that many students worked in part-time employment – some being significant breadwinners for their families. There is evidence that this has adverse effects on achievement (Davies 1999). Others referred to violence and street crime that their students could encounter between home and college, and also to an increasing incidence of challenging behaviour from some students.

These characteristics were sometimes associated with under-achievement at school – as in the cases of Colleges E and F, which were both situated in a borough where schools had received a critical OFSTED report, with a number being placed in special measures, and College K, located in a borough with a low post-16 staying-on rate. In these circumstances, many students appeared to have been 'spoon-fed' at school in order to attain their GCSEs, and arrived at college with inadequate skills for the more independent study demanded at Level 3.

Where English was not the first language of the household, students could face particular challenges adjusting to the demands of study at Level 3, particularly in the subject areas that demand higher skills of reading and writing, as noted by interviewees at Colleges E, F and J. In the last case, though, the predominantly Indian parents were perceived as possessing high aspirations on behalf of their children, as they were at College L.

Most SFCs in our sample were not the sole provider of that type of education in their area. Only Colleges D and H had no other SFC in their boroughs. A school had recently re-opened its sixth form near to College B, while a new SFC was shortly to open in a borough neighbouring that of Colleges E and F.

Mission and ethos

All colleges that were visited had missions that emphasised support to enable their students to achieve their full potential. Several, though, had placed more overt emphasis in recent years on serving their community in the fullest sense, and widening participation, sensitive to the need to demonstrate that they were not elitist and exclusive institutions. Thus, Colleges B, C and J perceived themselves as 'community colleges', while College C had dropped the words 'sixth form' from its title as long ago as 1991, in order to emphasise its tertiary approach. College B had developed a more vocational focus in its curriculum. College K had enjoyed a substantial increase in recruitment of adult students onto part-time courses, and Colleges B, C and J were also anticipating significant further increases in student numbers.

The colleges with the most deprived student profiles were especially conscious of the potential conflict between an open entry policy at enrolment and the drive to raise student achievement. The local competitive situation played a part here. Some interviewees were conscious of the impact on public opinion of the School and College Performance Tables, and the effects that

lowering the prior attainment profile might have on the end results, and therefore on relative prestige compared with other institutions.

In these circumstances, there had been widespread moves to strengthen the advice, guidance and other support provided to students, in order that they could still complete their courses successfully. A number of the associated systems in place appeared to be effective, as in the cases of Colleges A, F and H, which had been commended at inspection for the support that they provided for their multi-ethnic student bodies. There was a growing awareness, though, that 'caring' approaches were insufficient in themselves, and that student background should not be used unquestioningly as a reason for explaining low levels of achievement. At College D, for instance, there appeared to be a deep-seated belief that the student profile should not prevent good levels of retention and achievement. At College L, too, it was evident that considerable stress was placed upon the importance of setting high expectations for students from the very start. This shift of emphasis seemed to be gaining ground. Institutions have begun to move from explaining the performance of students by reference to social and economic factors. Instead, they are now more inclined to identify ways in which supporting students' learning might increase their aspirations, confidence and skills and so enable them to address, if not overcome, their social and personal difficulties. Hence, senior management teams sought to embed an attitude of mind that, though challenging, it was quite possible to combine widening participation with high academic standards. At College F, therefore, there was a renewed drive to improve student achievement. In contrast, the relatively less deprived student profile of College H was accompanied by issues of handling the unrealistically high aspirations of some students and their parents, and by tackling the under-achievement of others who arrived with high levels of prior attainment.

College C is committed to comprehensive education. There is a strong commitment to the individual student, to added value and opportunity. The college has a liberal subject entry policy. The college's mission statement was revised at a whole college 'away day' strategic planning conference in October 2000. In essence the mission is 'The college aims, through the quality of its provision, to add value for all of its students'. Some key decisions have been:

- to embrace the tertiary approach and lose 'sixth form' from the college name
- to develop work in the community with a focus on part-time for adults
- to make guidance a key part of the college's philosophy
- to have 'one staff'.

The college has grown considerably from 400 16–18 year olds in 1988 to the present 1050 full-time 16–18 year olds and 1500 adult students in 2002. It has a significant number of students on Level 2 courses and on vocational courses at Level 3.

College F. A recent OFSTED inspection commented on the 'caring, supportive ethos, which raises aspirations' and commended the 'safe, secure environment' and 'culture of mutual respect between staff and students'. The present principal, however, while acknowledging these strengths, is strongly committed to building on this ethos to place a greater emphasis on standards and higher expectations. There is a sense that problems of attendance, punctuality, irregular production of work and some student disaffection in the past have been the consequence of inconsistency of expectation, perhaps arising from an over-emphasis on caring for students rather than challenging inappropriate work habits brought with them from ineffective secondary schools. The college is in the process of re-examining itself in the light

of a new strategic plan that places the emphasis firmly on the pursuit of excellence through a learner-centred approach.

Centrality of retention and achievement

The improvement and maintenance of student retention and achievement was accorded high importance in all the colleges in our sample, though the evidence for this was often far more apparent from managers who were interviewed than from teaching staff. Sometimes the priority accorded to institutional performance in these areas was made quite explicit by unambiguous references within the college's strategic plan. More generally prominent were indications of the related time and effort expended by senior management teams (SMTs) and governing bodies.

As we have noted elsewhere (Davies 2002), once the post-Incorporation problems of finance and personnel were tackled, governing bodies have begun to get to grips fully with their educational leadership role, as recommended in previous chief inspector's reports (FEFC 1997, 1998). The ability of governors to discharge this role successfully has in turn been enhanced by improvements in the quality and timeliness of the information with which they are presented by SMTs concerning student retention and achievement.

At Colleges I and L, efforts towards the attainment of high levels of student retention and achievement had been a major strategic priority for a number of years. This commitment had borne fruit not only in the related performance indicators, but also in the widespread awareness and support for the drive to raise and maintain standards that was evident among their staff who were interviewed. In other cases, there were signs of more recently increased attention, stimulated especially by the impact of inspection, which had been assiduous in highlighting under-performance in retention and achievement from the second round onwards of the FEFC regime. At College E, for example, efforts were now being made to involve both the governing body and faculty heads more fully in the process of target setting, in response to comments made in their last inspection report. College B was in the process of implementing an action plan to tackle the declining retention rates in some subjects that had been noted in their FEFC inspection in 2000. The college's self-assessment report (SAR) also noted the need to retrieve a below average value-added performance over the last 2 years. Particular needs to improve subject retention and attendance had been highlighted at College A, while improving students' punctuality was a new priority at College H.

Most colleges had some involvement in local or national projects aimed, at least indirectly, at raising student achievement. In some, there was a very conscious policy of encouraging such engagement as a way of encouraging reflective practice, cascading new ideas, and raising the profile and prestige of the college. Colleges D and L had been granted Accredited Status by FEFC in 2000 and 2001 respectively. College D had also gained a Beacon Award in 2000. Other involvement included that with the Excellence Challenge

(Colleges D, E, F, J and K) and with development projects within the Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme.

Despite the above average performance of SFCs in student retention and achievement compared with other types of college, there was no significant sign of complacency concerning these issues apparent in the colleges visited during the project.

College I. Improvement of retention and achievement is the primary focus of many of the college's strategies. Reviews of achievement and retention take place at strategic level through the Strategic Planning and Standards Committee. Strategic targets are set for each aspect and take into account:

- past performance over 4 years
- the GCSE average grade profile
- retention from Year 1 to Year 2.

The targets are cascaded effectively into the college's quality framework.

College L. Since Incorporation, achievement rates have risen consistently, from 82% in 1982 to 94% in 2001; during the same period the college has seen 62% growth in 16–19 student numbers. The college was in a stronger position than most in terms of convergence, with an ALF of £19.75 in 1993 against the average for SFCs of £21.46.

Key factors in its success are perceived as:

- a clarity of focus upon achievement
- a rigorous but flexible value-added scheme with targets monitored regularly
- subject tutorial support for students
- clear responsibility and discretion at programme leader level
- teaching towards the top of the ability range – focused teaching aimed at high achievement
- maintenance of relatively high levels of departmental and CPD funding
- targeted support, monitored and followed up
- specialist tutors and electronic attendance monitoring, quickly followed up.

Leadership and staffing

A major factor in the performance of SFCs appeared to be the generally positive atmosphere that permeated the staff-rooms of the colleges that were visited. The large majority of the staff who were interviewed were clearly satisfied in their jobs, and shared the basic ethos of their college, even if they might have departed in some of the detail of the way in which policies were implemented by managements. There is other evidence to show that this is another area in which SFCs have benefited relative to other types of college (Davies and Owen 2001).

Principals and other members of SMTs who were interviewed stressed the importance of achieving an effective balance of stability and turnover, such that a core of experienced and high quality tutors and course/subject leaders

were periodically augmented by an influx of enthusiastic new staff, receptive to innovation and change.

Leadership, too, was an important factor. Increased emphasis on raising student achievement at Colleges F, G and J had followed in the wake of the appointment of new principals. In College F, there was a concern to build on the improved morale generated by a favourable inspection report, after the college had received significant criticism in the first round. In College G, the arrival of a new principal was accompanied by a restructuring of the management and a major readjustment in staffing, better to meet the needs of the modern post-16 curriculum.

At College D, the whole SMT had been appointed since 1998 and had managed the transition required by the changing external environment within the successful ethos originally established and preserved by the core of the staff. However, the long-serving principals at Colleges C and I (like College D, both with high ALPS value-added scores) clearly enjoyed the cordial respect of their staff, based on their detailed grasp of student performance, and their commitment to seeing that their colleges positively embraced the changing clientele brought about by widened participation.

This is not to say that tensions were absent. In a minority of cases teaching staff and, less frequently, managers who were interviewed decried the increasing emphasis on student achievement, which they saw as detracting from a primary responsibility of care. Staff morale was perceptibly lower in some of the colleges where below average UCAS points scores were also accompanied by below average value-added. Indeed, some interviewees saw the proliferation of value-added approaches as reinforcing a culture of blame. Against this, however, the large majority felt that effective pastoral support for students and the drive to improve achievement were by no means incompatible, as we shall see in Section 8.

College G appointed a new principal in 1999. Reorganisation of the management structure followed. There have since been a number of important changes in staff and roles, involving a turnover of about 50% in staffing. This has allowed more flexibility and opportunity to staff in accordance with the requirements of the new post-16 curriculum. The ramifications of the restructuring and the cultural shift that underlies it are still being worked through.

College J. Young community workers on the staff have led culture change: the age and ethnicity profile has been deliberately broadened, to provide more role models for students ('I want to be like that, I trust that person'). One of the highest achieving subject areas (law – top value-added scores 2 years running with high retention) is led by a young Asian female. Many students are engaged in paid employment, but staff commented that these students were often motivated about education because they see it as a way out of that type of low paid work. Efforts are made to keep staff morale high: celebrating achievements; arranging international links/foreign trips; nominating one teacher for an MBE; garden created outside staff-room; free tea/coffee provided in staff-room; inclusion of staff as well as students on publicity posters; posters and celebrations displayed all around college.

Key characteristics

- A clear commitment at senior management level to the delivery of high levels of student achievement, with active involvement of the governing body in setting targets and reviewing progress against them.
- The establishment of clear, challenging but realistic achievement targets for students and for course/subject areas.
- Effective communication to college staff of expectations about student achievement, and the associated targets.
- High morale, with both staff and students feeling that they are valued.
- An emphasis on continual improvement, supported by clear accountability.
- A concentration on maximising the capabilities of students, rather than on factors in their home background and prior attainment that might inhibit achievement.

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5. Strategies for maintaining and raising achievement

College-wide approaches

Though all colleges gave recognition to the central importance of student achievement, there was considerable variation in the extent to which this was translated into explicit and consistent college-wide strategies.

The Committee of the Corporation responsible for overseeing educational performance had helped considerably in giving more coherent focus at colleges such as A, C, F and H. College D adopted what its principal referred to as a 'many-pronged strategy' to ensure that raising and maintaining high achievement levels was central to its work. The strategy had been supported by in-service education and training for the whole staff, and rested on a course review system. It included target setting and action planning at all levels, rigorous monitoring and follow-up, and reports and frequent meetings to review students who were under-achieving or otherwise perceived as at risk. At College L, the Corporation received a regular report from the principal on student achievement, the topic was invariably on the agenda at meetings of the SMT, and progress reviews were held with heads of department after the publication of examination results in August and January. Though there was no specific written policy at College I, a coherent approach was apparent in practice, based on a quality framework that required all departments to report on student performance.

Whatever the differences in the overall approach, certain consistent features emerged in those colleges that seemed to be particularly successful at optimising the achievements of their students:

- the use of value-added systems to set individual achievement targets for students at Level 3 (though there were significant differences between the colleges in the amount of autonomy experienced by departments and course teams in their implementation, see Section 8)
- regular review of student progress in conjunction with curriculum leaders and course teams
- a requirement for action plans, where retention and/or achievement gave cause for concern
- regular reviews of progress in meeting action points between managers and teaching staff
- attention to the quality of teaching and tutorial support, accompanied by planned programmes of staff development.

In general, these aspects appeared to be particularly embedded in those colleges that displayed high value-added scores. However, in other cases there was evidence of renewed efforts to develop more rigorous and consistent approaches. The effectiveness of different strategies to tackle

student retention and achievement will be examined in more detail in Sections 6–10 of the report.

College B. The importance attached by the SMT to maintaining and raising achievement is evidenced in the curriculum review and validation processes in which they play a key part. The College Information Office supplies data on student numbers and retention statistics monthly. The college's operational plan highlights objectives in achievement, retention and attendance, and in improving the provision of data. The FEFC 2000 inspection commented that the governors should establish clear methods for monitoring the college's academic progress. From the minutes of the Curriculum and Standards Committee it is clear that there is a thorough discussion of issues with considerable provision of information to governors, including ALIS data, and departmental achievement and retention statistics. Under the guidance of the chair, governors have asked for more information. The Committee contributes to the validation of the SAR.

College H. Achievement and the quality of achievement are subject to rigorous evaluation. The value-added dimension enables the college to examine the quality of performance within each subject level and for each student. The Quality and Standards Committee reviews achievements and proposes the targets for achievement and retention in the light of previous outcomes. It also reports annually to the governing body. The principal's deputy and the assistant principal curriculum have overall responsibilities for quality and its monitoring, while the human resources director addresses classroom observation as part of the appraisal system. Aspects of achievement and its measurement are discussed at SMT meetings. Most recently these have included discussion on the action required to ensure that heads of department have a consistent approach to the measurement of value-added and the improvement of achievement in Level 2 Maths.

Communication of strategies

In most of the colleges, interviewees were well aware of the importance accorded to the achievement of high levels of retention and achievement. Understandably, managers were more likely than staff to have a full grasp of, and empathy with, overall college strategies in the area. This is not to say that teaching staff were unconcerned, but that their focus was more commonly at the level of the individual student. Some were inclined to stress the contribution to student retention made by caring support for students via such mechanisms as the tutorial system, and were less convinced by managerial stress on systematic planning, monitoring and improvement.

In general, though, we were struck by the effectiveness of internal communications in most of the colleges. Compared with GFEC/TCs, this may reflect the usually better staff morale that we have already noted in Section 4. It could also have been assisted by the relatively small size of some SFCs – for instance Colleges G, H and I, where much highly effective communication took place quite informally. Here again, the leadership and example set by the principal and other members of the SMT was a significant factor in the effective dissemination and explanation of college strategies and their rationale. At College D, which had recently been praised in an OFSTED inspection report for its good communications, teaching staff understood particularly clearly what was required of them, and were empathetic with the stress on student achievement. A daily bulletin was issued, and there was an annual timetable of staff briefings that were used to communicate policy, outline issues and generally update staff. At Colleges C and J, staff who were

interviewed were positive about the approachability of their principals and the 'open door' policy that they adopted.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the colleges with the greatest apparent success in terms of raising and maintaining student retention and achievement, and in maximising value-added, all seemed to enjoy high staff morale and greater unity of approach to the problem. However, in all of the colleges that were visited during the project, the large majority of teaching staff who were interviewed seemed to have absorbed the message that students' backgrounds need not prevent the college from making a significant positive impact on their achievement.

College A. Communication in the college is very good. Weekly briefings, newsletters and INSET help staff to have a clear understanding of college objectives and key issues. Documentation such as the strategic plan and the staff handbook are clear. Faculty and departmental meetings and reviews all contribute effectively to communication processes within the college.

College H staff were involved in the planning and discussion of strategy. Where there is a concern about awareness of issues these may be dealt with through a staff meeting which has a single agenda item. For example, the principal wanted to draw attention to students whose potential grade had been identified as B, but who had under-achieved. He distributed a list of the students concerned and invited views concerning the nature of the findings and the factors involved. This matter is now being pursued. Staff had also discussed the difficulty some had in raising the motivation of a number of able students who thought that they did not have to excel all the time to achieve. They felt that many students appeared to have a mechanistic approach to the college experience. Thus, the notion of doing more than they needed to achieve at an acceptable level to attain their goal did not give any apparent practical advantage. The challenge lay in finding ways to overcome this attitude.

Benchmarking and target setting

Along with other types of college, the corporations of SFCs are required by the LSC to set and agree targets for retention and achievement making use of nationally published benchmarking data. However, the LSC does not publish any separate benchmarks for high WP factor SFCs in the way that it does for GFEC/TCs, as in the former case the correlations between the degree of deprivation measured by the WP factor, and overall rates of retention and achievement, are much weaker.

Within our sample of colleges, there was considerable reliance on the national data for SFCs published by the LSC, even though the student profiles of a number of them were markedly different. At Colleges J and K, the principals had deliberately used the national medians to emphasise the importance of a drive to improve performance, as the colleges had been in the lower quartiles of SFCs according to the LSC's benchmarks. There had since been marked improvements. By contrast, the strategic plan at College F specified that its benchmark for achievement was the performance of 'inner city sixth form colleges of a similar type'. The aim was to strive to be among the best, but without misleading comparisons with colleges whose raw score achievements could not realistically be matched. In practice, the achievement rates of GFEC/TCs with similar student profiles were also studied. There was a strong

feeling that it was inappropriate for the college to measure itself too closely against standards set by selective colleges with radically different environments and intakes. At College E, too, the main comparison was with the performance of the 12 SFCs with the highest proportions of WP uplift students. As well as referring to the national data for SFCs, College D also looked specifically at the performance of other Catholic SFCs, and also that for some GFEC/TCs and schools.

All of the colleges visited made use of one or more of the nationally recognised systems of value-added, though the extent to which they were used to define overall college targets varied, as opposed to their application with individual students. At College I, ALPS was seen as being particularly useful for benchmarking purposes as it enabled comparison with other SFCs. At College L, targets were derived from a 'bottom-up' process based on improving or at least maintaining the grade score performance of the previous intake in each subject/course area.

The derivation of targets which are both challenging but realistic was rather less of a problem for the colleges in the area of overall rates of retention and achievement, where the spread of performance of full-time students was less than that for other types of college. Of more concern, the setting of realistic overall targets for students' UCAS points scores demanded quite sophisticated analysis, in order to take full account of the effects of student demography and subject take-up, as appropriate benchmarks could vary significantly according to these factors. More progress in that direction should ensure that overall targets are arrived at on the basis of what individual staff could be expected to achieve, given the national data for their subject area.

In several of the colleges, there were signs that staff involvement in the process had been enhanced by improvements in management information systems (MIS). At Colleges C and F, for example, the Electronic Attendance Registration System (EARS) had been introduced to good effect. Where past problems with MIS had not been fully resolved, as at Colleges E and J, there was less consistency and focus in the use of data.

College D. The college uses national and local data, including some from schools, and is aware of its position in relation to the FE sector, SFCs and, specifically, to Catholic colleges. Within national SFC benchmarks (derived from the FEFC/LSC website) targets are proposed by departments, agreed by the SMT and submitted to governors for approval. This process is seen as 'pushing yourself a little bit further to raise standards'. A new MIS has led to improved college data to support review, and heads of department are now pleased with the quantity, accuracy and relevance of the data they receive throughout the year.

Key characteristics

- Rigorous course review and self-assessment procedures, with the active involvement of curriculum leaders and course teams.
- Follow-up action plans, designed to address problem areas and meet targets.

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- Regular monitoring of retention and achievement, with clear accountability.
- A feed-through from course review into pedagogic and tutorial practice, supported by related staff development.
- Involvement of parents in the review of students' progress.

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6. Student recruitment, placement and induction

Pre-enrolment information

There was a widespread belief among interviewees that effective assistance to prospective students in making the right choices of college and course could make a significant contribution to the eventual successful completion of their learning. Certainly, there is reliable existing evidence to support this view (National Audit Office 2001).

Most colleges therefore put considerable effort into making early contact with such individuals in the decision-making stage, typically via open days, taster sessions, and 'road shows' round schools. This process could be particularly effective when it was appropriate to concentrate efforts on a relatively small number of 'partner schools', as in the cases of Colleges D and H. In other instances, as with Colleges A, E and G, the very large numbers of schools from which students were drawn placed particular demands on the teams responsible for schools liaison. At College B it was recognised that perceptions about post-compulsory education were likely to be forming well before Year 11, so specific programmes had also been implemented that involved contact with pupils in Years 8 and 10. College K had established an Intermediate GNVQ 14–16 link course in Art and Design with two local schools. School relationships were more problematical in the case of College B, where it was felt that a neighbouring school with a recently (1996) re-opened sixth form engaged in negative marketing at their expense, and at College F, where some local schools were perceived to possess low aspirations on behalf of their pupils.

Several of those we spoke to stressed the increased importance accorded to the production of accurate information about the college and what it could offer, and the projection of a truthful and realistic image. In a number of cases, marketing teams were working more closely with curriculum managers and teachers to ensure that this was done in a consistent and professional way. There had been increasing use of websites to communicate information directly, reducing the need to rely on dissemination and mediation via school careers and subject teachers.

Feedback from the students we interviewed, and in the form of evidence from previously undertaken surveys, suggested general satisfaction with the amount and quality of pre-enrolment information and advice, though several emphasised the impact of positive word of mouth over printed materials in the decisions that they eventually made. There were a number of examples of feedback from surveys undertaken shortly after enrolment being used to make modifications to the process of student recruitment. Perhaps inevitably, though, there were instances where some students still arrived at college with a lack of awareness of the realities of study at Level 3 (eg at College E), or

with misconceptions about their own abilities (College K).[4] The effective communication of the different and more challenging demands on students that would be made at college was therefore an area in which continual effort needed to be expended.

College D puts considerable resources into the provision of information to potential students. A 'road show' is taken to the seven partner schools, and staff attend Year 11 evenings (and go to some of the many non-partner schools). Three open evenings are held at the college, of which two are for students from non-partner schools. The attractive prospectus contains an annually updated pull-out section with subject descriptions, and each subject also has its own information leaflet. Students found the publications helpful but stressed word of mouth and reputation as prime sources of information about the college. All academic staff are involved in the initial interviewing of applicants, which is seen as an opportunity to establish the college ethos from the beginning of a student's contact with the college.

College E receives students from over 100 institutions, of which about 25 provide more than 10 students. There is much liaison work with local schools, up to 50 visits a year. Students are interviewed in their own schools rather than at college. There are links between curriculum areas at college and school level.

College K's prospectus is designed in accordance with disability awareness precepts regarding text and colour. All teaching staff go out into schools to interview. Taster days are arranged, plus two Year 11 open evenings. Taster days have been adjusted to form longer blocks (eg humanities, not just psychology). Level 3 students tend to arrive with clear ideas about university, but their assumptions about their own ability and progression prospects are often inflated.

Admissions policies

For many of the colleges, there were clearly tensions between the desire to widen participation and therefore to maintain an 'open enrolment' policy, and the simultaneous drive to improve student performance. Especially at Level 3, where the relationship between GCSE scores on entry and UCAS points scores on completion was well understood, there was a fierce debate as to the minimum requirements that should be set at entry to A-level and AVCE programmes. Though it was consideration of the effects on the levels of retention and achievement that usually stimulated demands for tighter entry standards, there was also some belief that they might also make it less difficult to improve measures of value-added.

Colleges within our sample were split between those who were striving to maintain a minimum entry requirement of four C grades at GCSE, and those who imposed greater demands. The former group included Colleges A, B, I, J and K, though in practice tighter grade requirements were sought for some subject areas. At College I, students entering with only four C grades were usually only allowed entry to two A-levels; a minimum of five C grades was demanded for entry to three A-levels. At College K, students entering with

[4] The data in Table 8.1 suggests that there may also be misconceptions on the part of teachers about the true potential of students. Many teaching staff in SFCs, for instance, would not expect students with a GCSE score of 5.0 to achieve grades CDD at A-level, as they do at the top performing institutions.

only three C grades were allowed to take two A-level subjects. The group with higher entry demands included Colleges C, F, L and H, the first three of these having a minimum entry requirement of five C grades – College F having only recently decided to raise its demands to this level – while College H had minimum requirements of seven Cs. Again there were several instances where higher grades were demanded in particular subjects, sometimes in the form of a preference for grade Bs in those to be studied at A-level. In part, at least, the decision arrived at by different colleges appeared to have been influenced by local competitive circumstances. For example, Colleges H and L were over-subscribed, which made it more possible for them to set demanding minimum standards at entry without suffering a decline in recruitment.

Teaching staff who were interviewed tended to be more likely to believe that entry requirements should be raised than their managers, who, some suspected, were motivated primarily by the incentives in the funding mechanism to boost enrolment. The principals at Colleges A and J, though, stressed the need to avoid placing undue restrictions on the opportunities afforded to students, preferring to set a low threshold and to provide good quality support for those with weaker levels of prior attainment. At College D, as well as the grades obtained, relatively more emphasis was placed on prospective students' references from their schools, and them having a parent present at interview. Particular attention was paid to the precise choice of programme of study, as it was felt that placement on the most appropriate programme was the main key to retention.

Colleges had also been active in considering modifications to their curriculum to ensure that a full-range of opportunities was available to students, including suitable learning pathways below Level 3. Further evidence of these approaches will be examined in Section 7. However, as noted by interviewees at College E, there was some feeling that the Curriculum 2000 initiative had in practice reduced the availability of suitable alternatives to the academic route that students could now be offered.

College B's ethos is that of giving opportunity to students. This is reflected in the minimum entry requirements of four GCSEs at grade C. Student choice and flexibility are built into the programme. Interviews are for a place at the college, rather than the course for which students apply. The college is introducing a new progress review day in September to fine-tune the learning programme.

College I has retained its admissions policy of four GCSEs at grade C and above to enter a programme leading to two A-levels, and five GCSEs at grade C for a programme leading to three A-levels. The admissions policy is supported by a thorough-going knowledge of the local schools and an understanding of what can be achieved through the use of ALIS and the college's past record. Experience has convinced staff that the policy is entirely appropriate. In support there is an effective tutorial/monitoring system, careers and counselling service, access to workshops and substantial time given to classroom activity. In 2001 the ALIS data indicated a possible overall A–C pass rate of 31%. The college actually achieved 59.2%. The pass rate of 95% A–E grades exceeded the national average.

College L raised minimum entry requirements for AVCEs from four grade Cs at GCSE to five (the same as for AS levels) because of the demands of the new curriculum, and to give the vocational route parity of esteem with the academic. The college's ethos and expectations emphasise academic excellence, and this is made clear to students from the outset.

Selection of courses and subjects

All of the colleges visited placed a great deal of emphasis on ensuring that students made an appropriate choice of course, as this was seen as a particularly important element in securing good levels of retention. Rigorous systems of enrolment interviewing were commonplace. By their very nature, most SFCs tended to receive the majority of their applications from young people who wished to enrol on A-level, or other Level 3 courses, as a vehicle for entry to higher education.

The nature and scale of the problems then involved differed according to the circumstances of colleges. Those with limited provision below Level 3, and with restrictions on the choice of vocational options at Level 3 (eg College D), were concerned to check that applicants were realistic in their expectations and ability to cope with the demands that would face them. As a result, some applicants were counselled that it would be in their interests to enrol on alternative courses at a local GFEC/TC. At others, the process was more akin to that at GFEC/TCs, where alternatives could be offered within the college, though students were frequently reluctant to accept that a course at Level 2 would be a more suitable choice.

Course placement was another area in which value-added data was used to arrive at decisions, and in the explanations and counselling given to students and their parents. This was generally seen to have been helpful to all concerned in the process. In practice, however, the rigid use of ALIS predictions in this respect could lead to the exclusion of students from some A-levels, when ALPS data indicates that at some other colleges their counterparts with equivalent GCSE scores are allowed to enter them, and eventually complete with pass grades. At College H, though, there was a long-established policy of giving curriculum breadth and encouraging students to enrol on four A-levels, allowing one to be dropped if necessary as the first year progressed. Under Curriculum 2000 some students were taking five AS levels in their first year, with most others taking four.

A number of interviewees, including those at College E, emphasised the enormous step-change compared with previous studies that many entrants faced in moving up to Level 3 courses, especially in the case of A-levels. It was therefore important to check out expectations and to begin the process of counselling them on what would actually be involved at the earliest possible stage. Most colleges incorporated a strong diagnostic element at the subject placement stage, with some students being immediately flagged as potentially at risk and therefore likely to need additional support from the beginning.

College A's students have an admissions interview, generally in February or March, which involves all teaching staff, although the faculty representatives do more interviewing than other staff. It is not a selection interview but an opportunity to talk through the possible subjects. In September students are re-interviewed to agree an appropriate course. Any subject doubts are discussed with a head of department. The college is very flexible in its procedures, which allow students to make course changes during the first few weeks.

A number of developments are happening or are planned:

- to encourage students to enter their GCSE grades onto a web page so that the college can print then off before the interview

- to prioritise students in three categories to indicate the degree of guidance and support they might need
- to evaluate further the influence that GCSE grades in Maths, English and Science have on subsequent performance
- to investigate drop-out among students with three or four GCSE grade Cs on entry. One outcome might be to target support or provide differentiated teaching.

College D's admissions policy is intended to ensure first that students are coming to a college which is appropriate for them and second to pay close attention to the individual's programme by combining in the interview process the impartiality of interviews by senior staff with the necessary specialist knowledge of academic staff. In the words of the chaplain, 'We want the best for them'. It is recognised that this college cannot always offer an appropriate course and students may be advised that it is in their interests to apply elsewhere. The college at present concentrates provision at Level 3 and has a restricted curriculum for Level 1 and 2 courses: there are also no facilities for many vocational options. It is important that all this should be recognised because inevitably some students arrive with inaccurate estimates of their own ability and some schools fail to prepare students adequately for making curriculum choices at 16. The ethos of the college is to respect and pay attention to the needs of individuals and this is evident in the approach to admissions. Students are counselled as carefully as possible to ensure they do not take on programmes at which they are unlikely to succeed. Entry requirements are not strictly followed if there are reasons for a student failing to achieve a given grade – this may include the interviewer's knowledge of the applicant's school – and students with weak prior attainment may be given the opportunity to start on a course and then have their progress closely monitored – for example, one student had failed to get a B grade needed for entry to AS Computer Science but was admitted to the course after a probing interview.

College F's key decisions on course choice are taken at enrolment. Students speak positively of the help they receive. They are counselled 'gently but firmly'. All students are screened on entry and appropriate cases referred to Learning Support. Students may change their previously agreed programmes up to half-term, but only with the agreement of relevant staff. If it appears from retention or achievement data that students are being inappropriately placed on a course, action is taken. A recent example was A-level Computing, where poor results led not only to staffing and curriculum changes but also to a change in subject-specific entry requirements.

Induction

The diagnosis of student capabilities and needs also comprised a major element of the formal induction programmes that colleges had in place. Most of these programmes combined elements of familiarisation with the college and with the requirements of the particular course and subject area. Some colleges allowed considerably more autonomy than others in the ways in which induction was organised in different departments, though at Colleges E and F steps were now being taken to achieve greater uniformity of effective practice.

Practice varied on the degree to which early transfers of courses and subjects were permitted in the light of experience. At College J, transfers were allowed up to the end of the first term, though some teachers there felt this was too late. At College D transfer was possible up to 4 weeks, but was discouraged from being taken lightly. At College L, considerable emphasis was placed at course selection and induction on students making a thorough evaluation of

their options before confirming their decision. These processes had been praised by the National Audit Office in a recent report (NAO 2001). As a consequence, very few students requested changes subsequently.

During induction there was considerable attention to the identification of need and the arrangement of provision for additional learning support, though in the case of College C most 'at risk' students were at Level 2 rather than Level 3. College I was in the process of reviewing the diagnosis of learning support need at both levels, because of concerns that learning needs were not being addressed sufficiently early on in students' courses. A growing issue for most of the colleges was the need to develop skills of independent learning that were particularly weak in increasing proportions of students who arrived with low GCSE scores. To this end, a major new initiative had been put in place at College F, backed by the establishment of a Learning Resource Centre, the manager of which was anticipated as playing a significant future role in improving the self-study skills aspects of induction. At Colleges J and L, time and resources had been allocated to curriculum areas to deliver specific subject focus and learning support.

Generally speaking, the students we spoke to were positive about their experience of induction, and their early impressions of their colleges. Most appreciated the level of care that was taken, and the advice and guidance that they were given. The more adult atmosphere of college and student–staff relationships compared with school was particularly welcomed. There was a minority of more negative reactions where individuals perceived that their opinion was not sought or valued, and where they felt they were still treated like schoolchildren. It therefore appears important that colleges demonstrate at an early stage that they value and take account of constructive feedback from students. Another recent report suggests that significant numbers of students in some SFCs feel that the voice of the learner is not heard strongly enough (Lumby *et al.* 2002).

College A's students have a general college induction programme. Students speak very favourably about college induction and enrolment procedures. Tutors are perceived to be very helpful. All courses have written guides for students giving advice about the subject. Some subjects have specific activities at the start of the course, but the pressures of AS do limit what can be done and induction has to be part of the course. There is recognition by faculty directors that induction could be improved and made more systematic.

College G. Prior to enrolment the Learning Support Service identifies those students who are known to require support for specific learning difficulties/disabilities, communication, emotional/behavioural and ESOL development. All students are screened on enrolment to assess their key skills. Details of the outcomes are given to students and tutors. Key skills are integrated, but Level 2 students are also able to access timetabled key skill workshops. It has been determined that this support should be made more relevant in the students' eyes through designing assignments based on the students' curriculum interests. This will be implemented in 2002/03. All tutor groups are timetabled to meet with Learning Support staff to deal with aspects of study skills, etc. All tutors are expected to remain with their groups while this activity takes place.

At **College L**, all courses have an enrolment/induction period of 2 weeks. Students with any symptoms of poor attendance are followed up immediately by the college's specialist tutor team, helped by the college's electronic registration system. Much time is devoted to ensuring that students are on the most suitable course and that they know what to expect from the subject. Subsequent changes are rare. The process is rigorous: during this period each

student is allocated around 5 hours of staff time. Students expressing interest in a subject are sent by the enrolment tutor to the department for evaluation of their suitability. Students are encouraged to discuss their choice with their parents, who are welcome to visit the college to discuss it with teachers and tutors. The induction programme includes a tour of college and a briefing on minimum expected grades.

Key characteristics

- Effective communication of the curriculum offer course requirements and progression opportunities via a range of media.
- Close and constructive links with feeder schools.
- Clear entry criteria, with an emphasis on inclusiveness.
- Individual diagnosis of students' academic potential, and their needs for learning and pastoral support.
- The availability of 'taster' sessions and associated strategies to assist students to make early-stage course transfers when appropriate.
- Well-planned induction programmes, with clearly explained but challenging expectations of what will be required from students on their courses.
- Early and effective support to improve students' independent study skills, wherever necessary.
- Attention to the selection and training of staff involved in student recruitment, enrolment and induction.

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7. Curriculum development

Curriculum innovation in response to student needs

As we have indicated already, most SFCs have taken a strategic decision either to concentrate on provision at Level 3, or also to develop and expand courses at Levels 1 and 2 to offer alternative learning pathways and progression ladders for students with lower levels of prior attainment. In the case of the former group, considerations of curriculum change are concentrated mainly on the portfolio of AS/A2 subjects and AVCEs.

Thus at College B a wide range of courses were offered at AS/A2 and AVCE, which could be combined to provide a programme of study appropriate to student need. However, consideration was now being given to introducing BTEC First and National level courses in order to provide a curriculum more suitable for some students. College C offered a broad-based curriculum with a range of academic and vocational courses at Levels 2 and 3, supplemented by tutorial time, key skills, enrichment activities and, where appropriate, additional learning support. College E had strengthened its range of courses at Levels 1 and 2, where it had obtained good results. Some adult education courses have been withdrawn because of poor recruitment and retention, and at Level 3 adjustments have been made to provision in Travel and Tourism and Music Technology. At College F, the curriculum had been developed to meet the needs of the intake, and therefore sought to maximise retention and achievement by providing appropriate entry and progression points. GCSE retakes had been removed from the curriculum in the light of poor results, and foundation and Level 2 courses developed wherever possible. At College J, mixed programmes were encouraged, with combinations of Level 2 and Level 3, and academic and vocational programmes. All AVCE students there also undertook an AS level.

Notwithstanding the considerable adjustments to the curriculum that had taken place in many of the colleges we visited, the issue of the availability of alternative learning pathways and progression ladders within a college is perhaps one that many SFCs should reconsider given, for example, the numbers of GCSE re-sit subjects taken by students in some of them.

At **College J**, the inspection report in 2000 had noted that the introduction of GNVQ Science courses meant that the college was now providing courses that will lead to more appropriate accreditation for some students.

At **College K**, students are able to take a combination of courses at different levels, depending on GCSE grades, so that those with only two or three GCSEs at grade C can take one or two AS subjects and have the rest of their programme made up of Level 2 courses. This provides more options for students and allows some challenge of higher level study in their better subjects. It used to take such students 3 years to acquire three A-levels; now they can pick up enough qualifications to progress to university after 2 years. The present offer is perceived as enabling the maintenance of momentum in the area of students' strengths.

Curriculum 2000

At this stage it is too early to make a considered evaluation of the likely long-term impact of the Curriculum 2000 reforms. At the stage we spoke to them (February–April 2002) the majority of interviewees identified more problems than advantages. Only at Colleges A and I were the large majority of reactions positive, though staff at the former college indicated that the new framework was tougher on the weaker students. To date, however, College I had seen improvements in both retention rates and achievement at AS level, since Curriculum 2000's inception. Responses were much more mixed at Colleges B, C, E and K, while doubts predominated at Colleges D, F, J and L. Interviewees at Colleges G and H generally preferred to reserve their judgement.

The main advantages of the new framework were perceived to lie in its greater flexibility. This allowed for a wider range of subjects to be studied in the first year, with a legitimate rationalisation then occurring as students were guided by their experiences to concentrate on those subjects where they were strongest. In most cases students were taking four AS levels, and reducing to three, though in some instances significant numbers were starting with five AS levels. Achievement at the end of Year 1 had also been good in a number of cases, and students now had recognition in the form of qualifications for their progress at that stage.

Criticisms of Curriculum 2000 included:

- problems with key skills, which many students disliked and where in some cases achievement rates have been badly affected
- the increase in standards and change in content of AVCE and Intermediate GNVQ, which has had the practical effect of reducing the availability of programmes appropriate to students who were not suited to academic courses.

In some instances (eg Colleges E and J) a significant reduction in progression from Years 1 to 2 was attributed mainly to these difficulties.

Overwhelmingly, teachers complained about the new content-heavy syllabuses – as did many of the students to whom we talked – and the 'unremitting grind' that it could produce. A number of managers highlighted the dilemma that this imposed. It increased the pressure on staff to resort in the short-term to didactic methods at precisely the same time as initiatives were being launched to improve independent learning skills – especially among the weaker students. While staff were pleased when additions to teaching hours had resulted, they also pointed to the threats that pressures on time posed to the preservation of the range of extra-mural activities which some perceived as a traditional strength of SFCs.

At **College C**, achievement was very good in the first year of Curriculum 2000. The college had begun planning early for the introduction. Key issues were perceived as:

- the demands on staff time to prepare for AS and A2
- problems with the delivery of key skills
- supporting students to deal with the increased workload.

Students are generally taking four subjects, and are more focused than they used to be, but there are some indications of greater stress and pressure.

At **College E,** staff see some positive outcomes from Curriculum 2000. It has allowed students to follow broader programmes – for example by following Photography AS as a broadening subject in their first year. In-year retention has improved and the availability of interim accreditation is seen as valuable. However, continuation from first to second year is down. There are also complaints about the loss of teaching time to extra examinations and the implementation (though not the aims) of key skills. The new curriculum has had an adverse impact on mathematics, with a large drop in the numbers going forward to the A2 programme after AS level. The main complaint concerns the 'unmitigated disaster' of AVCE, which is perceived to have removed the positive aspects of GNVQ as a viable alternative to A-level, instead requiring students to work at A2 level in the first term.

Curriculum structures, organisation and delivery

A number of colleges had responded to differences in students' learning abilities and needs by providing additional support in the form of workshops, where it was required. At Colleges D, H and I, additional workshops had been made available in all subjects, in the first-named case supported by the Learning Resource Centre. Identification of those students in need of additional support, and encouragement for them to access it, was a major element in induction and tutorial systems.

Attempts were also being made to adjust structures to encourage students' acquisition of independent study skills. At College J, sessions towards this end were now timetabled. Concepts of inclusive learning and differentiation between students in teaching approaches were less well developed in most cases, though these areas had been earmarked for increased attention at Colleges E and F.

Timetabling practice varied significantly. Particular issues here were the short attention spans of some students, the extent to which students could and would make effective use of any gaps in the timetable for private study, and the typical patterns of hours of the part-time work in which the large majority were engaged. Changes in the timetable had been made in a number of instances better to accommodate student needs and circumstances. At College A, a slight reduction in the length of sessions was made in order to create an additional 45-minute weekly block of timetabled tutorial support. At College B, a number of different models had been tried, but 65-minute sessions had been settled upon as the most appropriate to students' concentration spans, while sufficient to accommodate a variety of learning activities. College J adopted a 'little and often' approach, with an early finish to the day at 15.50, to accommodate students' part-time working hours. College I had striven to eliminate gaps from the timetables of individual students, and to stress the importance of high levels of non-formal contact between staff and students.

The timetables at Colleges E, F, H and K appeared to have created gaps that were unpopular with at least some students and, in the case of the first two, a

session length inappropriate to the needs of some students – especially at Levels 1 and 2. At College F, restrictions on the capacity of the current accommodation made it difficult to resolve the problem in the immediate term.

At **College I,** the use of ICT is well developed and is applied very effectively in several subjects, including Science. The intranet is expanding and there is a range of learning resources that can be accessed online via the college website. All workstations have unlimited internet access and up-to-date versions of industrial software. Both staff and students commented on this being an important feature of the college. As well as new approaches to delivery, staff emphasised that they had held on to some of the 'old', particularly in the provision of laboratory practice, field trips and other subject-relevant visits and practical experiences. Such activities were considered to be in danger of being squeezed out by the pressures of content-focused syllabuses and increased class sizes.

At **College C,** the timetable has been revised. The change was planned in response to new demands created by Curriculum 2000, lack of space, consideration for individual students to ensure they came into college for a sensible period of time on any one day, and an understanding of the importance of part-time work. A key feature of the new timetable is that each subject has blocks of 2.5 hours. It was considered that there were productive spin-offs from the change in terms of improved attendance. It was also anticipated that teachers would be encouraged to develop new pedagogic styles in order to maintain interest throughout the 2.5 hour period.

College J's timetable is similar to that of a school – 'little and often'. Self-study is timetabled in support areas, where there are facilities (that many of them lack at home) for students to undertake course work. Arrangements have been made for teachers to share groups. One high achieving team has two teachers per group, with one teaching the topic and the other handling its revision by students at a later stage. This is seen to act as a valuable moderating process.

Key characteristics

- Adaptation of the curriculum portfolio to support widened participation in line with mission including, where appropriate, the broadening of vocational opportunities at Levels 1 and 2, and provision for adult students.
- Commitment to concepts of inclusive learning with differentiated approaches to the needs of individual learners.
- A proactive approach to encouraging the take-up of additional learning support by those who require it.
- High expectations of students, supported by good teacher–student relations.
- An emphasis on the opportunities presented by Curriculum 2000 for the improvement of student achievement and progression.
- Review and adjustment of the timetable, taking account of students' attention span and out-of-college commitments.

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8. Tutorial systems and other support systems

Tutorial support

Given the centrality of Level 3 provision at most SFCs, and the aspirations of many students ultimately to enter higher education, there was an established tradition of tutorial systems playing a key role in the review of students' academic progress, as well as providing pastoral care.

The detail of systems differed to some extent. In some colleges (eg College A) the twin roles were combined by the same tutor; in others (eg College B) they were performed by different individuals. Usually the tutor was one of the subject teachers of the students in her/his group. Some colleges (eg C and E) had introduced 'super-tutors', each responsible for the oversight of several groups of students.

The number of hours per week allocated to tutorials also varied, as did the split between the time available for group and one-to-one sessions. The best time to schedule tutorials was a matter of some debate, with interviewees in some colleges indicating that sessions tended to be poorly attended if they occurred at the end of the college day. In most cases a total of 1–2 hours per week was allocated, with group sessions predominant. The least amount of time per week (30 minutes) was provided at College I, but staff there stressed that, in addition, one-to-one formal academic monitoring tutorials were held three times per year, plus a further two career planning and HE entry progression reviews with a senior tutor which took place in the second year. Nonetheless, although the college's last inspection report had commended the overall guidance and support given to students, it had also found that the tutorial programme could not be delivered effectively in the time available. The situation was therefore being reviewed.

In most cases staff were happy with current tutorial arrangements, and there was also evidence of very positive feedback from students. Students also seemed generally happy with the balance of academic and pastoral tutorial support that was available to them, though there were instances where some students felt that there was too much emphasis on achievement at the expense of other personal needs. College B's last inspection had recognised its tutorial system as a particular strength. At College C the benefits of the introduction of super-tutors was apparent in the improvement in the quality of reporting, and in better grades being recorded when tutorials were formally observed. In contrast, there was concern at Colleges E, F, J and K with inconsistencies in approaches. At College G some students felt tutorials were too long, while staff pointed out that the same overall time applied irrespective of group sizes, which could vary considerably. There were complaints at College L about the amount of administration involved. A re-examination of the effectiveness of the system was under way at College E, where a senior manager commented that there was a need to tackle the absence of a culture

of partnership between academic and pastoral care (though a recent OFSTED report had praised the latter area). College F was endeavouring to respond to comments in its last inspection report which, while generally favourable, had found 'variable practice in tutorials' and 'inconsistencies in the use of progress files'. A number of the colleges had bolstered staff development activities in the area of tutoring.

At **College A**, all full-time students have a personal tutor who is responsible for their academic progress and for pastoral issues. Students stay in the same group for 2 years, which is usually within the faculty of their main studies. There are two half-hour personal tutorial sessions each week, which are used to disseminate college information and provide opportunities for individual interviews. Departments offer academic tutorial sessions, which students can attend, or be directed to do so if there are concerns about progress. Academic tutorials are timetabled for staff but not for students. The tutorials can be for general help or to address specific weaknesses. From questionnaire responses and individual interviews it is apparent that students think that the academic tutorials are very helpful.

At **College E**, tutoring has featured in the college INSET programme for the last 2 years, including work as part of the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative. The tutorial observation programme has been rewritten. Tutorial development will be an important part of the costed action plan for the current Strand 2 staff development programme.

College L has moved from the 'each teacher a tutor' system to a team of around 30 dedicated specialist tutors, with case loading and time allowance. This is felt to provide for more consistent delivery and greater accountability. The tutor is seen as the individual student's learning manager. Each student is allocated 15 minutes twice weekly in a group tutorial. There is also considerable autonomy for tutors to arrange individual tutorials according to need. The student questionnaire indicates a positive response to these arrangements. Tutor meetings are held monthly, and there are regular training days. Updating sessions are also held on UCAS requirements, and tutors are supported to take relevant qualifications (eg counselling). Specialised training has been held for enrolment, with briefings at the start of each enrolment day. This has resulted in fewer students changing course (now less than 10%, and mainly involving enrichment activities rather than the main programme).

Target setting and value-added

At Level 3, all colleges in our sample made extensive use of one or more of the systems of value-added. Most entrenched was the use of ALIS to set minimum target grades (MTGs) for individual students. (MTGs were, in fact, given a range of titles across the different colleges, but the same principles applied.) Though there were criticisms from some teaching staff of the detail of their application, the overwhelming consensus was that value-added systems had made a significant contribution to raising student achievement. They were felt to encourage more appropriate individual attention to optimising students' potential achievements, based on a relatively robust and generally reliable methodology.

A number of the colleges were now giving more attention to the use of value-added data to analyse the relative performance of different subject and course areas, and to compare the whole college with other comparable institutions. In this respect it was notable that Colleges A, E, H, I and K were using ALPS to these ends, and College G planned to do so, as it was perceived to facilitate comparisons with other SFCs. At all colleges, heads of department and

curriculum managers were held accountable for the performance of their students, including retention and achievement. This accountability was usually manifest in the self-assessment reports and accompanying action plans. There was some difference in the rigour with which the process was applied. At College H, for instance, inspection in 2000 had resulted in greater attention being given to the role of managers in effecting improvement. The college's staff development plan for 2002/03 included sessions for new middle managers aimed at improving departmental effectiveness in the area of student achievement.

There was considerable variation across the different colleges in the detail of the implementation of MTGs, and the degree of consistency in the approaches of different departments and subject areas. At College J, for instance, student targets were negotiated. Though based loosely on ALPS, they were adapted by each subject area to be motivational for their students. Teachers were mainly focused on the borderline performers. College F was seeking to raise horizons by adding one whole grade to the MTG implied by ALIS. Progress reviews were used each term to compare students' current level of achievement against their MTGs and to devise appropriate follow-up action plans.

Student reactions to the use of MTGs were generally less positive than those of teaching staff, with notably negative opinions at some colleges. The main criticisms centred on the perception that grades were imposed on students at an early stage in a way that could have a demotivational effect – either because the predicted outcome grade was high, so that any fall from the top standard felt like failure, or because it was lower than students themselves felt they could achieve. A major issue here appeared to be the sensitivity with which value-added and MTGs were established in practice. A rigidly employed and overt process of MTGs, non-negotiable by the student, was by no means guaranteed to stimulate them to higher levels of performance. At the two colleges in our sample with the highest ALPS value-added scores (C and I) both staff and students seemed relatively unconcerned with the precise detail of MTGs, though the senior management teams in both institutions used value-added data to obtain a good grasp of student performance. At College I there was close attention to the nature of any under-achievement. While the relationship between past and potential performance was drawn to the attention of students, and any under-achievement made clear, care was taken to ensure that students' self-perceptions, and their reactions to learning in general, remained undamaged.

College C uses value-added in its review and self-assessment processes, and as part of its quality strategy emphasises the 'proactive use of value-added for students and course teams'. Personal tutors receive a grade based upon the ALIS residuals, and grades from subject tutors three times a year. They use these grades to discuss progress with students at individual reviews. If there are difficulties, appropriate action is agreed with the student and short-term targets are set and monitored. Reports including predicted grades are sent to students before Christmas in Year 1. An important use of the ALIS data is in the final interview stages to inform the advice and guidance process when deciding a student's course.

College I has used a modified form of ALIS for several years. It has now started to adopt ALPS, as it allows comparison with like institutions. The college uses the information as a background to counselling students about their capabilities and potential. Dependent on

students' needs, staff use the ALIS chances information, and establish MTGs. Factors such as attendance, regular homework, etc, are also discussed. Students failing to make progress, and for whom there appear to be no adverse social or personal factors, may be referred for a review involving the senior tutor and/or principal. The focus is the nature of the under-achievement. The relationship between past and potential performance is drawn and the unacceptability of the present performance is made clear. However, the aim is to assist students and not to damage inadvertently their perceptions of themselves as learners, and of education in general. Action may be through short-term goals being set, attendance at workshops, using additional learning resources, re-sitting any tests, modules, etc. Students were aware of the kinds of outcomes they could achieve. They were not specific about a possible grade but all had confidence that their teachers and tutors would support them to maximise their potential.

Overall satisfaction of students

Despite mixed reactions to the use of MTGs, at most of the colleges a large majority of the students we interviewed said that they felt valued and that they were treated with respect. In general, students appeared pleased to be at the college they were attending, in some cases (eg College I) markedly so. At Colleges A and G, students said that they would like to receive more feedback on the results from the surveys in which they participated, in the former case also indicating that they would have liked to have had a chance to give feedback on quality of teaching within their survey.

There was a more mixed reaction about the onus placed upon students to achieve. At College L, some students felt that the college pressurised them too much; conversely, others at Colleges J and K claimed that teachers were 'too soft' (though the latter perceptions may, of course, have been inappropriately resentful about the sensitive treatment of fellow students who were less able and organised than those who had voiced these complaints).

A key issue here, therefore, appeared to be striking the right balance between the inculcation of a culture of high expectation from students, within the framework of a community where individuals felt cared for and respected for themselves.

At **College F**, one tutor said 'We are a caring college but the emphasis is on learning.' A student commented 'If you don't ask, you don't get – but tutors are helpful.' Pastoral care is taken seriously. Students feel valued and spontaneously praised the principal's receptiveness to their views. 'They treat you like adults, they don't chase you around.'

At **College H**, students felt valued and stressed the accessibility of staff and the individual support received. They thought that the teaching was good and that if they worked they should achieve their qualifications.

College J's students were enthusiastic and unanimous in their loyalty to the college, comparing it favourably to others where they felt students were not valued as individuals. Comments included:

- 'teachers have more time for you here'
- 'teachers put in extra time and effort'
- 'teachers are always there' [near the subject study areas]
- 'I've got another mum' [her tutor].

In terms of academic standards, however, the tone was more critical:

- 'students miss deadlines and don't get hassled'
- 'students miss classes and turn up just before the exam and take all the teachers' attention off us'
- 'teachers aren't strict enough'.

Key characteristics

- Regular review of students' academic progress and personal circumstances, on an individual basis as well as in groups.
- Rigorous use of value-added systems, both to assess the minimum grades expected from each student, and to review the performance across subject areas and courses.
- Setting target grades taking into account the typical achievement of equivalent students at SFCs with the highest value-added scores.
- Sensitive use of value-added data with individual students, so as to secure their full motivation to maximise their potential.
- Close links between tutorial and teaching staff, and between academic and pastoral support systems.
- Structures that facilitate and ensure referral to flexible systems of additional learning and personal support.
- Careful selection and effective training of staff with tutorial responsibilities.

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9. Teaching and pedagogy

Course review

Generally speaking, quality assurance (QA) systems and procedures for self-assessment encompassed thorough processes for course reviews. There was usually a good level of commitment to self-assessment, and a belief that it helped retention and achievement to be accorded the importance that they warranted. Typically, as at College G, the QA cycle began in September with programme and subject area reviews of the latest results. This led to self-assessment at subject level, feeding into the college SAR, which incorporated student views and the outcomes of classroom observations. A QA committee then moderated the judgements. Each review and SAR gave rise to actions and targets involving teaching staff, curriculum managers and the principalship. At College F, two further progress reviews were then held later in the year to monitor progress against the targets that had been set. Weaknesses identified in the review process were triggers for proposed actions in the development plans, which together were fed into the college plan. As part of the course review process, student focus groups had been introduced, sometimes identifying concerns that had led to curriculum changes – as with amendments to a scheme of work in a business studies course.

Again, there were some inconsistencies in approach, and at some colleges (eg College C) not every department exercised the same degree of self-critical analysis. At College J, the last inspection report recorded that 'there was little use of performance indicators and target setting in some course reviews', though action was now being taken to address this issue. At College D, too, the last inspection report had been critical that SARs were often descriptive rather than evaluative, with insufficient judgements of the quality of teaching and learning. The standard of action planning also varied. Procedures were now being tightened accordingly, and it was believed that the systems in use had already made a significant contribution to placing retention and achievement at the heart of the college's work.

College B has very well documented self-assessment, curriculum review and validation processes. Heads of departments think that the SAR is helpful and that it has made staff more reflective and helps them to focus upon key issues. Where these arise during the validation process, a separate post-SAR validation review is held and an action plan drawn up as appropriate. There is a comprehensive process of faculty curriculum review undertaken by a team of senior managers, which mimics an inspection, looking at achievement and faculty documentation, and carrying out lesson observations. A trained inspector is a member of the team in order to provide moderation and an external perspective. A report is produced and feedback given to the head of faculty and heads of department. Faculty staff are also invited to give feedback. Issues arising from the review are included in an action plan. Staff recognise the importance of the process.

At **College G**, there is a QA system that includes all areas of the college. The QA cycle begins in September with subject area reviews of examination results. This leads to subject reviews that progress in to subject SARs, and the college SAR, which incorporates students' views and the outcomes of classroom observations. A QA committee moderates the SAR

judgements. Each review/SAR gives rise to actions and targets that involve teaching staff, curriculum managers and the principal.

Teaching and learning strategies

Though evidence for concerted overall strategies to share effective practice and improve pedagogical skills was not always apparent, there was a clear sense of priority areas for improvement in a number of the colleges we visited. The most common initiatives were seen in the areas of inclusive learning, and the need to introduce approaches which were more differentiated to the needs of individual students. Colleges C, G and H had concentrated INSET on these areas, and Colleges D, E and F were in the process of strengthening related development programmes, to ensure more consistent follow through. At College C, a new senior curriculum manager had been appointed with a brief to encourage pedagogical development across the college. In the case of College J, involvement in the Gifted and Talented initiative was challenging the tendency of teachers to focus on marginal performers, with the hope of raising their expectations of the performance of all their students.

In contrast, College I had linked much of its recent developmental work with teaching staff to the introduction of a range of more imaginative approaches to lessons, making more use of ICT and learning resources. Interactive materials were now a central part of learning strategies in subjects such as biology and business studies. There had also been an accompanying drive to develop students' organisational skills, including revision strategies and examination techniques. At College K, though, problems had been experienced with good quality science teaching materials which had been utilised with success at Greenhead and at Leggott SFCs. Here, they presented difficulties because of poor levels of independent learning skills on the part of many students. The materials required students to make notes in their study time, following experiments in lessons. However, the students had other priorities during their non-contact time, and also lacked the skills to undertake such work without close supervision.

Systematic procedures for lesson observation were in place at a number of the colleges, linked to appraisal and tailored programmes of staff development. In 1997, College F had established a system of peer observation linked to staff development. This had now been changed to a line-managed, appraisal-linked system as a result of the introduction of the new teacher reward scheme. Lessons were now graded, and the aggregated grades fed into the SAR. The thrust of the scheme was towards student achievement, and managers viewed it as a key means of improving standards. Observations continued to identify staff development needs. Staff acknowledged that peer observation was insufficiently rigorous, and recognised that the new system fitted more naturally into the accountability culture. At College G, too, there had been a radical overhaul of the system, replacing peer review by that undertaken by managers and then subjected to moderation. All managers concerned received training in the new system before it was implemented. Observation fed into the appraisal system and the

planning of staff development. Procedure at College I was currently under review, in the light of staff doubts about its role in identifying their developmental needs. A new, more rigorous approach was in the process of introduction at College D.

Most of the staff we interviewed said that they felt valued by their managers, and almost invariably they expressed satisfaction with their teaching role. Morale appeared to be less high where colleges had experienced less favourable past inspection reports (as at Colleges G and E). In some instances there were more concerns about tight resources and restrictions on space, but against this there were a number of favourable references to the way that ICT support to students and staff had improved.

At **College D**, workshops are held in each subject area and are timetabled in the last period of the afternoon. They are very well attended and give the opportunity for students to have one-to-one subject support. Differentiation within large classes is seen as problematic in many areas of the curriculum, but there are examples of effective practice in this area such as the use of individual and flexible learning in A-level Chemistry. The college is extremely well provided with computers and students make good use of the Learning Resource Centre. However, the main way in which teachers respond to individual needs is through careful monitoring of student progress, detailed response to written work and knowing their students as individuals.

At **College H**, staff receive information regarding each student's preferred learning styles. They have also participated in the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative. Some staff now plan lessons to ensure that all students experience different learning activities during the course of a lesson. The college intends to develop further work on differentiation. The development of the intranet means that students can access learning materials for their areas of study, and can thus work independently and at their own pace. Staff are engaged in action groups as and when is necessary (eg researching effective diagnostic tools). The college has a rigorous approach to lesson observation. Staff thought to be falling below grade 3 are seen again and monitored. Observations are undertaken by the line manager and the outcomes contribute to appraisal. There are supportive materials and all staff have guidelines indicating what constitutes good practice in the classroom/workshop. The college also has an internal inspection process that monitors nominated departments each year. It is part of college policy to share good practice and this is done both informally and formally. Departmental meetings provide opportunities to discuss and consider effective practice. Opportunities are also provided to discuss good practice in small inter-departmental groups. Staff attending external courses are also tasked to inform colleagues about practice seen elsewhere.

College K has a rigorous lesson observation programme that follows OFSTED criteria. Each teacher is observed annually by a member of the senior management team. Teachers are graded and given personal feedback. Line managers receive copies of observation notes and make use of them in appraisal. One teacher commented that being observed 'raises awareness of specific things you can change'. Programme leaders meet with the principal to discuss the SAR, which includes teaching and learning strategies.

Key characteristics

- Rigorous course review procedures, with active involvement of teaching staff.
- Belief that teaching and learning strategies have a significant impact on student achievement.

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- Commitment to inclusive learning, with development of differentiated approaches to teaching and learning support, and an emphasis on students' independent study skills.
- Systematic procedures for lesson observation, linked to appraisal and tailored programmes of staff development.
- Sharing of effective practice, via meetings, working groups and staff development programmes.

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10. Monitoring, evaluation and follow-up

Information systems

There was widespread agreement that gradual improvements in the ability of college management information systems (MIS) to supply managers and staff with accurate and timely information about student attendance, retention and achievement had made an important contribution to identifying potential problems and following them up effectively. Information systems seemed most effective at Colleges A, F, G, H, I and K, and adequate at Colleges B, D and J. At College F, teachers and managers agreed they now had the information that they wanted, when they needed it – a major strength of the college in their eyes. At College I, the MIS had also been developed and was now able to report each student's grade profile, retention and attendance record. At College H, improvements had now made it possible to acquire information about students at an earlier stage, allowing attendance and retention issues to be tackled from the outset.

In contrast, at College E it was widely believed that past failures to provide timely and accurate information had been a significant weakness of the college, which had seriously hindered the ability to confront issues of retention and achievement in the way that they would have liked. At College J, a change of MIS software during the year had caused some disruption, and an interruption in the flow of statistics to course teams for monitoring purposes.

Follow-up of absence and backlogs of work

Compared with GFEC/TCs, SFCs had traditionally had higher levels of expectation about student attendance, continuing the 'in loco parentis' role from the origins that many had in the schools from which they were formed. Interviewees agreed, though, that today the issue was accorded much more systematic attention. In part this was because problems concerning students' attendance and punctuality were perceived to have grown – influenced, no doubt, by the changes in student profiles we described earlier in this report, as well as the shifts in 'youth culture' that have affected students from all types of background. Failing patterns of attendance had also come to be recognised as symptoms of potential subsequent student withdrawal, and it was therefore regarded as important that such signs were identified and followed up at an early stage. Computerised systems of attendance monitoring and recording, which were in place at several of the colleges, had further helped to ensure that this process was handled with greater efficiency than hitherto. Inconsistencies were still apparent, though, in the ways in which different departments followed up absence.

At **College G**, absence is followed up in a number of ways:

- random checks by the attendance officer

- absence notification by teachers to tutors (pink slip)
- monitoring activities of assistant team leaders.

The attendance officer was active in an area of the curriculum where attendance was judged to be below acceptable levels. Staff had the mobile numbers and e-mail addresses of all students, so that absentees could be contacted soon after the start of a lesson. Deadlines for work were strictly implemented by all staff, with standard letters sent to the parents of students who persistently failed to present work on time.

At **College I**, the MIS has been developed to meet the new needs. It is now able to give reports on each student's grade profile, retention and attendance. Discussion is taking place to decide whether to forward absence reports from the MIS to senior tutors. To date, absence monitoring is undertaken by subject teachers and tutors. Attendance is rigorously monitored. Irregularity of attendance, or four consecutive absences from classes without acceptable formal notification, is followed up by a letter from the subject teacher. Tutors are alerted that such letters have been sent.

Learner involvement and feedback

Mechanisms for student feedback existed in all of the colleges that we visited though, as we have noted, they were not always as extensive or effective as students themselves would prefer. Most often missing from the 'loop' were clear indications to students of the outcomes of surveys, how they had been interpreted by managers and staff, and what specific actions had resulted.

Questionnaire surveys, conducted at least annually, represented the most common formal mechanism via which feedback was sought, in some cases supplemented by focus groups. College B also had a Student Council in place. Informal communication links between staff and students appeared particularly effective at Colleges I and J. Examples were quoted of ways in which student opinion had been taken into account, including a revision to history course work at College D, and a re-design of some types of homework activity at College I. Ostensibly, course review mechanisms at all colleges made use of student feedback, but there was little evidence of other than routine analysis of survey data. There may therefore be significant gains to be made from a more proactive involvement of learners in course review, and from more detailed analysis of survey results which, for example, might identify the key characteristics of students most and least satisfied with their experience at college, and then spread effective practice giving rise to the former group, and tackle issues related to the latter.

At **College A**, student surveys are completed anonymously. There are individual course questionnaires, as well as one that deals with the college overall. Individual subject surveys are completed in each area and used as evidence for the self-assessment process. There is a template for all subject surveys, which provides a core to which departments can add subject-specific questions. A cross-college group considers issues arising from the responses.

Issues can be raised at the departmental review with the faculty director, who reports back to the senior management team. The college has PinPoint software, which can benchmark individual course questionnaires against the data for the rest of the college.

College L employs three formal survey instruments, two completed online. Results from all are reported to the corporation (which has a student member) and to the Student Council.

The student intranet page carries the complete report – including the development plans – that goes to the college management team and the corporation as part of the monitoring cycle. In addition there is Electronic talkback, an anonymous online feedback system that involves response to every query, with answers posted on the student intranet page. All queries are seen by the principal. In 2000/01 the system dealt with 250 issues raised by students.

Key characteristics

- Management information systems (MIS) capable of providing accurate and up-to-date information on retention and achievement.
- Readily available online access to MIS on the part of managers and teaching staff.
- Commitment to high levels of attendance and punctuality, with immediate follow-up of unexplained absence.
- Emphasis on student obligations as well as entitlements.
- Early identification of problems manifested in absence and/or backlogs in coursework, with timely follow-up and remedial support.
- Involvement of parents and other family members in sustaining student commitment.
- Student feedback sought regularly and systematically, with effective communication of results and follow-up action.

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11. Conclusions and implications

The contribution of sixth form colleges

Sixth form colleges continue to make a major and distinctive contribution to post-16 education, especially at Level 3 where they turn out a substantial proportion of qualified students. They vary significantly one from another, but few could be said to conform to the stereotype of 'super grammar school sixth form' which is sometimes applied. None escape the challenges inherent in widening participation. The drive to increase the proportion of the 18+ age cohort who meet university matriculation targets inexorably produces more applicants with lower levels of prior attainment, and no family tradition of study towards advanced qualifications. A minority of SFCs have curriculum and student profiles that have more in common with some GFEC/TCs than with most other SFCs. A few have student bodies with indicators of deprivation as acute as any GFEC/TC.

Retention and achievement performance

On the face of it, retention and achievement rates at SFCs are better than those for other types of college. The gap between the highest and lowest rates across SFCs is also relatively narrower, in respect of younger, full-time students. The spread of overall retention rates across SFCs has converged considerably towards the higher levels of performance. To some extent, this is a reflection of the distinctive student profiles of SFCs which, compared with GFEC/TCs, tend by their very nature to enrol smaller proportions of their students with extremely low levels of prior attainment. Unlike GFEC/TCs, there also appears to be little correlation between student demography – including indicators of deprivation – and overall rates of retention and achievement. This suggests that there could be scope for some improvement in the case of those colleges with rates below the current median. Certainly there is a case for a number of SFCs to examine their performance in respect of part-time, adult students, where the 'achievement gap' is much wider and where, at the bottom end, achievement rates are inferior to those of GFEC/TCs. This may reflect some lack of focus on the needs of such students, compared with their larger 'core markets' of younger people studying full-time.

At Level 3, though, the major concern of SFCs is not so much with overall rates of achievement but with the specific grades that students achieve in AS/A2 levels and AVCEs on completion. Here, there exists a clear relationship between prior attainment measured in GCSE points scores and achievement on completion expressed in UCAS points scores – the basis of the value-added systems that are employed widely within SFCs. The spread of results across SFCs is considerable, reflecting the wide differences in the average GCSE scores of their intakes. To some extent, the latter are

negatively correlated with measures of deprivation. In turn, some ethnic minority groups suffer above average levels of deprivation.

Value-added performance

Thus while some SFCs appear among the uppermost state institutions in the School and College Performance Tables, others appear well down the list. Though the basic concept of value-added is referred to increasingly in the media, its impact in practice is not well understood by the general public, in the absence of relevant published data that receives similar prominence to the performance tables. The effect of this is undoubtedly to lower the relative prestige of some SFCs, in a way that is by no means always warranted, while others may enjoy an undeservedly inflated reputation. As we have seen, there are significant differences in the relative value-added scores of SFCs. Some with apparently unimpressive UCAS points scores in fact demonstrate value-added scores that are in the top flight. Others that are well up the league tables based on the raw results display value-added performances significantly below the median.

Scope for improvement

In fact, the overall profile of value-added scores indicates that the large majority of SFCs perform at least adequately in the progress that their students make at Level 3, and some are adding value to their performance on a highly impressive scale. Only in the lower quartile does the data suggest that value-added performance should be notably better than it is at present – especially in the 10% or so of SFCs with the lowest value-added scores. This is not to say that other SFCs have no room for improvement. As the ALPS data indicates, the middle 50% of SFCs in terms of value-added could raise their performance to that of the top quartile by an improvement that broadly equates to securing one grade higher than at present in around a third of their examination entries. Many colleges, also, have one or two subject areas where value-added performance is persistently lower than others in relation to the national profiles for the subject areas concerned. In these cases, greater sharing of best practice from similar subject disciplines that achieve better results should enable improvements to be made.

However, the main challenges in shifting value-added scores forward to the level of the current upper quartile of SFCs appear to lie in improving the achievement rates and raising the UCAS points scores of students whose GCSE performance places them at the threshold of entrance to Level 3 programmes. Most disturbing is the compelling evidence presented by the designers of the ALPS system that at some SFCs significant numbers of such students fail to pass one or more of the subjects for which they are entered, or are excluded from entry altogether, while their counterparts in other SFCs obtain three pass grades. This suggests that a number of colleges should at least re-examine their current practice carefully to see what they might learn

from those who are proving more successful at enabling ostensibly similar students to achieve at Level 3.

Is the value-added playing field level?

On the other hand, it has been posited that it becomes harder to add value in circumstances where there is a majority of students with below average GCSE scores, and where the challenges of deprivation and significantly multi-ethnic student populations are well above average. The evidence here is somewhat ambiguous. At institutional level, analysis does not suggest that there are any correlations sufficient to explain variations in value-added along these lines. Some SFCs with student profiles of this type in fact achieve above average value-added scores. As we have noted, however, other researchers have identified a slight but significant effect on performance of the relative prior attainment profiles of students. In cases where this is above average, there are indications that the performance of the weaker students benefits, and their achievement on completion is raised to levels above that which would have occurred in other circumstances. Whatever the balance of the statistical evidence, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that where the large majority of students enter at the threshold of their ability to cope with the demands of a Level 3 programme, there will be major challenges to be faced if they are all to fulfil their potential. In contrast, where only a small proportion does so, it may be more feasible to concentrate learning support on those who need it. No doubt a critical mass of high achieving peer group exemplars can also have an impact in stretching the expectations and achievement of some of the weaker students at entry.

Key success factors

The evidence from our in-depth investigations in a sample of 12 SFCs indicates that there are two key areas to their ability to sustain and raise achievement levels. First, is their capability in using value-added systems rigorously and consistently enough to ensure that students are set challenging but appropriate targets. To be fully successful, the related advice and guidance then needs to be mediated sensitively in order to sustain student motivation. Similarly, management evaluation of the performance of different programme and subject areas also needs to be carried out rigorously, but in the spirit of continuous improvement and learning from effective practice, rather than a 'culture of blame'.

Second, effort needs to be invested in developing the capacity for independent study among the larger numbers of students with insufficient capability in this area to cope fully with the demands of many courses at Level 3. This presents real difficulties in the context of the demands of Curriculum 2000. Nonetheless, a continuation with didactic approaches is unlikely to add value to them in the longer term.

Other characteristics of effective practice

Otherwise, the characteristics of effective practice that we have noted in our study are largely consistent with those identified in our previous research (Davies 2001), namely:

- a robust and developmental curriculum, quality, personal and learning support framework that enables each student to access learning programmes that will meet changing needs and aspirations
- the importance accorded to raising achievement within the college's strategic plan
- the regular and thorough consideration of the issue by the senior management team and governing body
- the establishment of achievement targets, against which progress is monitored, and the appropriate use of benchmarking against comparable colleges
- effective communication with staff about the potential for raising student achievement
- the inculcation of high expectations, both of students and of staff
- the devolution of responsibility and accountability for influencing student achievement to curriculum leaders and course teams
- course review, monitoring and action planning, with an emphasis on regular face-to-face contact between managers and staff
- encouragement of initiative and innovation by teaching staff, within the context of a clear college-wide policy framework
- review of teaching strategies and the performance of individual teachers, backed by supportive staff development for aspects identified as needing improvement.

Compared with other types of college, many SFCs tend to benefit in the areas listed above from their smaller size, their generally higher staff morale, and the related effectiveness of informal communication mechanisms.

Tables

Table 1.1. SFCs participating in primary research element of project. EM = East Midlands, GL = Greater London, NE = North East, SE = South East, WM = West Midlands, YH = Yorkshire and Humberside

College	Location	% students below Level 3	% WP uplift students	% ethnic minority students	Full-time retention rate (%)	Long course achievement rate (%)	Average GCSE score	Average UCAS points per subject	Value-added index
A	WM	8.2	64.5	53.6	92	88	5.5	5.0	0.92
B	SE	23.6	1.2	2.8	88	89	5.8	5.3	0.92
C	SE	12.7	30.0	3.3	92	76*	5.6	5.6	1.16
D	GL	13.2	72.1	56.6	93	80	5.4	5.7	1.03
E	GL	18.9	92.0	86.5	89	82	5.1	4.3	0.84
F	GL	22.6	88.2	84.0	92	83	5.3	4.5	0.88
G	GL	19.3	24.6	43.7	90	82	5.5	4.6	0.81
H	GL	6.7	7.6	45.1	95	84	6.0	5.5	0.98
I	NE	30.2	25.3	4.6	90	93	5.6	5.8	1.07
J	EM	26.0	53.3	84.8	90	76	4.7	4.5	0.91
K	YH	15.1	50.1	1.2	87	83	5.2	4.2	0.91
L	EM	31.0	27.2	72.3	97	93	5.6	6.3	1.04

*In 2000 this college aimed to accredit its enrichment and tutorial activities through the Open College Network (OCN). The resulting achievement rates depressed the overall figure. The A-level pass rate in the same year was 94%, with over 41% at grades A and B and almost 64% at grades A–C.

Table 1.2. Grades of participating SFCs at last inspection

College	Last inspection	Grades									
		Cross-college*					Curriculum area				
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
A	OFSTED: November 2001	-	1	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	-
B	FEFC: January 2000	1	4	-	-	-	-	4	1	-	-
C	FEFC: October 1998	-	2	3	-	-	-	4	-	-	-
D	OFSTED: September 2001	-	1	-	-	-	1	5	1	-	-
E	OFSTED: January 2002	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	5	-	-
F	OFSTED: February 2002	-	1	-	-	-	-	6	2	-	-
G	OFSTED: November 2001	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	4	2	-
H	FEFC: October 2000	1	3	1	-	-	1	2	1	-	-
I	OFSTED: October 2001	-	1	-	-	-	-	4	3	-	-
J	FEFC: March 1999	-	3	1	1	-	-	2	1	1	-
K	FEFC: October 1998	-	3	2	-	-	-	1	3	-	-
L	FEFC: October 1999	1	4	-	-	-	1	3	-	-	-

*Under FEFC inspection arrangements, cross-college grades were awarded for Support for students, General resources, Quality assurance, Governance and Management. Under OFSTED, only one cross-college grade is awarded – for Leadership and management.

Table 2. All students (in 000s) enrolled in FE sector colleges in England in 2000/01 by age and college type and mode of attendance. Source: LSC (2001b)

College type	Mode of attendance	Under 16	16–18	19–59	60 and over	Age unknown	Total	% college type	% all students
General FE and tertiary colleges	Full-time full-year	4.1	358.8	207.3	2.7	0.6	573.5	16.6	*15.2*
	Other full-time	4.0	19.5	188.5	5.7	2.9	220.6	6.4	*5.9*
	Part-time	38.3	177.7	2168.6	243.7	42.7	2671.0	77.1	*70.9*
	of which evening only	3.4	27.9	601.5	49.1	9.2	691.1	19.9	*18.3*
	Total	**46.5**	**556.0**	**2564.5**	**252.0**	**46.2**	**3465.2**	**100.0**	***92.0***
Sixth form colleges	Full-time full-year	0.3	113.2	4.2	0.1	-	117.7	54.5	*3.1*
	Other full-time	0.1	0.8	6.6	0.3	0.1	7.8	3.6	*0.2*
	Part-time	0.5	5.6	71.5	10.9	2.0	90.5	41.9	*2.4*
	of which evening only	0.2	1.2	31.6	4.0	1.0	38.0	17.6	*1.0*
	Total	**1.0**	**119.5**	**82.3**	**11.2**	**2.1**	**216.1**	**100.0**	***5.7***
Other colleges	Full-time full-year	0.1	12.0	7.8	-	-	19.9	23.0	*0.5*
	Other full-time	0.9	0.6	4.8	0.2	0.2	6.7	7.8	*0.2*
	Part-time	2.1	5.9	44.7	5.0	2.4	60.1	69.3	*1.6*
	of which evening only	0.3	0.3	8.1	0.8	0.6	10.2	11.7	*0.3*
	Total	**3.1**	**18.5**	**57.3**	**5.3**	**2.6**	**86.7**	**100.0**	***2.3***
Total all colleges	Full-time full-year	4.5	484.0	219.3	2.8	0.6	711.2	18.9	*18.9*
	Other full-time	5.0	20.9	199.9	6.2	3.2	235.2	6.2	*6.2*
	Part-time	41.0	189.1	2284.8	259.6	47.1	2821.6	74.9	*74.9*
	of which evening only	3.9	29.5	641.1	54.0	10.8	739.2	19.6	*19.6*
	Total	**50.5**	**694.0**	**2704.0**	**268.5**	**50.9**	**3768.0**	**100.0**	***100.0***
% all students		*1.3*	*18.4*	*71.8*	*7.1*	*1.4*	*100.0*		

Table 3. Students (in 000s) enrolled in FE sector colleges and external institutions in England from 1994/5 to 2000/01 by funding status. Source: LSC (2001b)

			2000/01	% change 1999/00 to 2000/01	% change 1994/5 to 2000/01
Students enrolled on FE provision funded by the LSC in colleges	By college type	General FE and tertiary colleges	2804.8	*3.8*	*41.3*
		Sixth form colleges	198.9	*4.4*	*47.0*
		Other colleges	57.4	*27.2*	*28.0*
	Total		**3061.1**	***4.2***	***41.4***
Students enrolled on other provision in colleges	By college type	General FE and tertiary colleges	660.4	*–8.7*	*–19.6*
		Sixth form colleges	17.1	*–17.3*	*49.0*
		Other colleges	29.4	*5.6*	*–17.5*
	Total		**706.9**	***–8.5***	***–18.6***
All students enrolled in colleges	By college type	General FE and tertiary colleges	3465.2	*1.2*	*23.5*
		Sixth form colleges	216.1	*2.3*	*47.2*
		Other colleges	86.7	*18.9*	*7.9*
	Total		**3768.0**	***1.6***	***24.2***

Table 4. Students (in 000s) enrolled on LSC-funded FE provision in FE sector colleges and external institutions in England in 2000/01 by institution type and level of qualification. Source: LSC (2001b)

Level	Qualification type	By institution type				Total	% all students
		General FE and tertiary colleges	Sixth form colleges	Other colleges	External institutions		
Level 1 and Entry level	GNVQ	7.4	0.6	0.1	-	8.0	*0.2*
	NVQ	37.1	0.3	0.6	0.3	38.3	*1.1*
	Other	764.2	33.4	9.8	144.6	952.1	*27.9*
	Total	**808.7**	**34.3**	**10.5**	**145.0**	**998.4**	***29.3***
Level 2	GCSE	52.7	4.9	0.1	14.4	72.1	*2.1*
	GNVQ precursor	21.3	0.4	2.0	0.8	24.5	*0.7*
	GNVQ	31.5	6.2	0.2	-	37.9	*1.1*
	NVQ	160.7	2.5	3.0	1.6	167.9	*4.9*
	Other	515.2	14.7	13.7	59.6	603.3	*17.7*
	Total	**781.4**	**28.7**	**19.1**	**76.6**	**905.7**	***26.6***
Level 3	GCE A/AS level	114.1	90.1	0.4	6.8	211.4	*6.2*
	GNVQ precursor	103.5	2.5	7.6	0.1	113.7	*3.3*
	GNVQ or VCE A/AS level	72.9	15.3	1.0	0.1	89.4	*2.6*
	NVQ	78.3	2.0	1.4	1.1	82.7	*2.4*
	Access to Higher Education	30.3	0.7	0.2	1.5	32.7	*1.0*
	Other	269.7	6.5	8.1	24.3	308.6	*9.1*
	Total	**668.8**	**117.1**	**18.7**	**33.9**	**838.6**	***24.6***
Levels 4, 5 and HE	NVQ	18.7	0.2	0.2	-	19.2	*0.6*
	Other	40.5	0.4	0.6	0.7	42.1	*1.2*
	Total	**59.2**	**0.6**	**0.8**	**0.7**	**61.3**	***1.8***
Other	Open College Network	37.2	0.2	0.2	9.2	46.8	*1.4*
	Other	449.5	18.0	8.2	81.8	557.5	*16.4*
	Total	**486.7**	**18.3**	**8.3**	**91.0**	**604.3**	***17.7***
All levels		**2804.8**	**198.9**	**57.4**	**347.2**	**3408.2**	***100.0***
% all students		*82.3*	*5.8*	*1.7*	*10.2*	*100.0*	

Table 5. 1999/00 summary statistics: individual institution results. Source: LSC (2001c)

	Average level of funding 1999/00 (£)	Change in student numbers				Student numbers		In-year retention rate				Qualifications achieved							
		1998/9–1999/00		1997/8–1998/9		1999/00		1999/00		1998/9		1999/00				1998/9			
		FT %	PT %	FT %	PT %	FT no.	PT no.	FT %	PT %	FT %	PT %	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sector and college type medians																			
Sector	**16.94**	**1**	**3**	**–2**	**–1**	**1359**	**4450**	**87**	**84**	**87**	**84**	**77**	**73**	**81**	**77**	**77**	**70**	**78**	**76**
Specialists	16.97	0	12	–2	–5	453	850	87	85	89	85	74	72	86	82	80	70	83	79
GFEC/TC	16.88	0	2	–2	–3	1714	6288	84	84	86	85	76	70	77	74	75	67	74	73
SFC	17.06	2	6	0	13	1070	462	92	79	92	79	82	81	88	85	84	86	89	86
External institutions	**11.72**	**10**	**2**	**7**	**0**	**14**	**671**	**100**	**80**	**97**	**78**	**74**	**76**	**84**	**76**	**78**	**80**	**86**	**82**

Table 6. Benchmarking data 1999/00: retention and achievement rates.
Source: LSC (2001a)

Table 6.1. SFCs and GFEC/TCs: enrolments on notional Level 1 long qualifications

		16–18		19+	
		SFC	GFEC/TC	SFC	GFEC/TC
Number of starters		31,700	184,200	15,800	382,200
Retention rate	mean	82%	80%	74%	79%
Achievement rate	mean	77%	66%	77%	68%
Achievement rate (all completers)	mean	70%	62%	68%	64%
Breakdown of number of starters					
GNVQ and precursors		2%	5%	0%	0%
NVQs		1%	11%	2%	7%
Other		97%	84%	98%	93%
Measures of college variability					
Retention rate	*10th percentile*	66%	70%	60%	70%
	25th percentile	75%	76%	69%	74%
	median	82%	80%	79%	79%
	75th percentile	89%	85%	91%	84%
	90th percentile	94%	88%	100%	88%
Achievement rate	*10th percentile*	48%	49%	48%	50%
	25th percentile	71%	60%	67%	61%
	median	81%	67%	82%	71%
	75th percentile	89%	76%	93%	78%
	90th percentile	97%	82%	100%	85%
Achievement rate (all completers)	*10th percentile*	32%	44%	36%	46%
	25th percentile	53%	55%	51%	57%
	median	71%	63%	68%	67%
	75th percentile	81%	71%	83%	73%
	90th percentile	91%	78%	95%	78%
Number of colleges measures of college variability are based upon					
Retention		96	229	82	229
Achievement		94	229	77	229
Achievement rate (all completers)		96	229	78	229

Table 6.2. SFCs and GFEC/TCs: enrolments on notional Level 2 long qualifications

		16–18		19+	
		SFC	GFEC/TC	SFC	GFEC/TC
Number of starters		88,200	289,900	14,100	375,900
Retention rate	mean	82%	77%	75%	79%
Achievement rate	mean	82%	68%	78%	68%
Achievement rate (all completers)	mean	77%	65%	70%	64%
Breakdown of number of starters					
GCE A/AS levels		51%	26%	31%	15%
GNVQ and precursors		8%	12%	3%	3%
NVQs		1%	19%	10%	24%
Other		41%	42%	56%	59%
Measures of college variability					
Retention rate	*10th percentile*	73%	68%	64%	69%
	25th percentile	77%	73%	70%	74%
	median	82%	77%	78%	79%
	75th percentile	86%	80%	87%	82%
	90th percentile	90%	83%	100%	86%
Achievement rate	*10th percentile*	61%	55%	51%	57%
	25th percentile	77%	64%	71%	65%
	median	89%	70%	82%	71%
	75th percentile	93%	77%	95%	78%
	90th percentile	96%	82%	100%	84%
Achievement rate (all completers)	*10th percentile*	51%	51%	43%	51%
	25th percentile	67%	60%	56%	61%
	median	80%	66%	72%	67%
	75th percentile	90%	72%	81%	73%
	90th percentile	93%	78%	94%	79%
Number of colleges measures of college variability are based upon					
Retention		101	228	95	229
Achievement		101	228	94	229
Achievement rate (all completers)		101	228	94	229

Table 6.3. SFCs and GFEC/TCs: enrolments on notional Level 3 long qualifications

		16–18		19+	
		SFC	GFEC/TC	SFC	GFEC/TC
Number of starters		216,000	284,000	11,100	295,800
Retention rate	mean	80%	77%	69%	79%
Achievement rate	mean	85%	73%	74%	69%
Achievement rate (all completers)	mean	82%	71%	63%	65%
Breakdown of number of starters					
GCE A/AS levels		81%	47%	44%	15%
GNVQ and precursors		4%	25%	4%	9%
NVQs		0%	4%	12%	17%
Other		14%	23%	40%	59%
Measures of college variability					
Retention rate	*10th percentile*	67%	67%	51%	71%
	25th percentile	76%	72%	61%	75%
	median	81%	76%	71%	79%
	75th percentile	84%	80%	80%	82%
	90th percentile	88%	84%	89%	85%
Achievement rate	*10th percentile*	75%	58%	53%	56%
	25th percentile	81%	65%	61%	62%
	median	86%	72%	73%	71%
	75th percentile	90%	80%	88%	79%
	90th percentile	92%	86%	96%	84%
Achievement rate (all completers)	*10th percentile*	72%	56%	43%	54%
	25th percentile	78%	62%	55%	59%
	median	84%	70%	63%	67%
	75th percentile	89%	77%	77%	73%
	90th percentile	91%	84%	88%	78%
Number of colleges measures of college variability are based upon					
Retention		101	229	98	229
Achievement		101	229	95	229
Achievement rate (all completers)		101	229	95	229

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Table 6.4. SFCs and GFEC/TCs: enrolments on notional Level 4 long qualifications

		16–18		19+	
		SFC	GFEC/TC	SFC	GFEC/TC
Number of starters		-	2600	500	57,600
Retention rate	mean	-	81%	72%	81%
Achievement rate	mean	-	69%	79%	60%
Achievement rate (all completers)	mean	-	65%	42%	55%
Breakdown of number of starters					
GNVQ and precursors		-	0%	-	1%
NVQs		-	5%	29%	20%
Other		-	95%	71%	79%
Measures of college variability					
Retention rate	*10th percentile*	-	50%	31%	68%
	25th percentile	-	67%	40%	76%
	median	-	82%	77%	82%
	75th percentile	-	100%	91%	88%
	90th percentile	-	100%	100%	93%
Achievement rate	*10th percentile*	-	0%	34%	39%
	25th percentile	-	50%	55%	49%
	median	-	75%	87%	63%
	75th percentile	-	100%	100%	74%
	90th percentile	-	100%	100%	86%
Achievement rate (all completers)	*10th percentile*	-	0%	3%	33%
	25th percentile	-	40%	21%	44%
	median	-	67%	41%	58%
	75th percentile	-	92%	95%	69%
	90th percentile	-	100%	100%	78%
Number of colleges measures of college variability are based upon					
Retention		-	185	27	225
Achievement		-	163	22	224
Achievement rate (all completers)		-	166	23	225

Table 7. GCE A and AS level examination pass rates in 1997, 1998 and 1999 by institution type. Source: FEFC (1999) based on DfEE (1999)

	Schools			Sixth form colleges									Other FE colleges								
	1999			1997			1998			1999			1997			1998			1999		
	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E	Entries (000s)	% A–C	% A–E
A-level 16–18	464.8	62	91	121.5	53	88	123.4	55	89	123.7	55	89	98.9	40	76	96.3	42	78	91.1	42	79
A-level 19+	4.8	50	76	4.1	39	71	3.6	44	75	3.4	45	76	41.6	37	65	34.7	39	76	31.4	40	70
A-level total	**470.3***	**62**	**91**	**126.2**	**53**	**87**	**127.0**	**54**	**88**	**127.2**	**55**	**89**	**142.3**	**40**	**73**	**131.1**	**41**	**76**	**122.6**	**42**	**77**
AS level	**38.5**	**36**	**72**	**12.8**	**31**	**69**	**14.0**	**31**	**69**	**14.5**	**29**	**69**	**14.8**	**23**	**56**	**16.7**	**23**	**58**	**17.8**	**24**	**60**

* Some A-level totals do not add up exactly because there were some 'unknown age' entries.

Table 8.1. Performance of SFCs by banded average GCSE points scores on entry. Table based on 191 sets of college data from 2000 and 2001 compiled from over 200,000 A-levels/AGNVQs entered by over 73,000 students. Note that ALPS defines the boundary of the top quartile as the 75th percentile, whereas the convention employed by the LSC, as displayed in Tables 6.1–6.4, defines it as the 25th percentile

Student GCSE score	Student numbers	Highest	90th	75th	60th	Percentile median 50th	40th	25th	10th	Lowest
7.5–8.0	1650	10.00	9.82	9.62	9.43	9.34	9.24	9.11	8.73	7.14
	Mainly	AAA	AAA–	AAA–	AAB+	AAB	AAB–	AAB–	ABB	BBC–
7.0–<7.5	5139	9.56	8.91	8.68	8.53	8.43	8.33	8.12	7.62	6.21
	Mainly	AAA–	ABB+	ABB	ABB–	ABB–	ABB/BBB	BBB+	BBC+	CCC+
6.7–<7.0	4324	9.00	8.32	7.92	7.74	7.63	7.50	7.26	6.86	5.60
	Mainly	AAB/ABB	ABB/BBB	BBB–	BBB/BBC	BBB/BBC	BBC+	BBC–	BCC+	CCD+
6.4–<6.7	6201	8.17	7.65	7.33	7.07	6.97	6.85	6.63	6.23	5.77
	Mainly	BBB+	BBB/BBC	BBC	BBC/BCC	BBC/BCC	BCC+	BCC–	CCC+	CCC/CCD
6.1–<6.4	7857	8.15	6.98	6.67	6.38	6.27	6.15	5.91	5.60	4.74
	Mainly	BBB+	BBC/BCC	BCC	BCC/CCC	CCC+	CCC–	CCC–	CCD+	CDD+
5.8–<6.1	8274	8.09	6.46	6.07	5.79	5.63	5.48	5.25	4.90	4.08
	Mainly	BBB	BCC/CCC	CCC+	CCC–	CCD+	CCD+	CCD–	CDD+	DDD+
5.5–<5.8	9480	6.63	5.85	5.39	5.12	4.99	4.90	4.69	4.36	3.78
	Mainly	BCC	CCC–	CCD	CDD–	CCD/CDD	CDD+	CDD	CDD/DDD	DDD–
5.2–<5.5	8814	6.12	5.24	4.95	4.65	4.47	4.38	4.19	3.85	3.32
	Mainly	CCC+	CCD–	CCD/CDD	CDD	CDD–	CDD/DDD	DDD+	DDD–	DDE
4.7–<5.2	12292	5.77	4.85	4.51	4.26	4.11	3.95	3.69	3.34	2.81
	Mainly	CCC–	CDD+	CDD–	DDD+	DDD+	DDD	DDD/DDE	DDE	DEE+
4.0–<4.7	9053	6.19	4.89	4.39	4.19	4.00	3.76	3.22	3.09	2.33
	Mainly	CCC+	CDD+	CDD/DDD	DDD+	DDD	DDD/DDE	DDE–	DDE/DEE	DEE/EEE

Table 8.2. A-level grade variation by banded average GCSE points scores

Student GCSE score	90th–10th percentile	Grade difference	75th–25th percentile	Grade difference
	UCAS points		UCAS points	
7.5–8.0	1.09	0.55	0.51	0.26
7.0–<7.5	1.29	0.64	0.56	0.28
6.7–<7.0	1.46	0.73	0.66	0.33
6.4–<6.7	1.42	0.71	0.70	0.35
6.1–<6.4	1.38	0.69	0.76	0.38
5.8–<6.1	1.56	0.78	0.82	0.41
5.5–<5.8	1.49	0.75	0.70	0.35
5.2–<5.5	1.39	0.7	0.76	0.38
4.7–<5.2	1.51	0.76	0.82	0.41
4.0–<4.7	1.80	0.90	1.17	0.59

Table 9. ALPS value-added performance of SFCs by A-level subject and AGNVQ programme area in 2000/01

Subject	No. of SFCs	Highest	75th %	Med.	25th %	Lowest	Grade difference	
							Highest–lowest	75th–25th
Accounting	44	1.30	1.03	0.89	0.75	0.25	3.5	0.9
Art	180	1.76	1.25	1.13	1.01	0.66	3.7	0.8
Art (GNVQ)	31	1.99	1.45	1.36	1.25	0.80	4.0	0.67
Biology	184	1.30	0.96	0.87	0.76	0.53	2.6	0.67
Biology (Human)	80	1.10	0.84	0.72	0.62	0.14	3.2	0.73
Business Studies	185	1.54	1.10	0.99	0.89	0.54	3.3	0.7
Business Studies (GNVQ)	120	1.76	1.52	1.37	1.12	0.48	4.3	1.33
Chemistry	178	1.22	0.98	0.89	0.79	0.44	2.6	0.63
Classics	37	1.47	1.17	1.05	0.90	0.48	3.3	0.9
Communications	47	1.57	1.09	0.94	0.79	0.46	3.7	1.0
Computing	162	1.37	0.95	0.81	0.70	0.31	3.5	0.83
Design and Technology	107	1.70	1.07	0.93	0.77	0.20	5.0	1.0
Economics	117	1.29	1.04	0.91	0.79	0.43	2.9	0.83
Electronics	25	1.64	1.41	1.13	1.04	0.61	3.4	1.23
English Literature and Language	54	1.26	1.05	0.91	0.83	0.51	2.5	0.73
English Language	172	1.39	1.06	0.94	0.84	0.53	2.9	0.73
English Literature	184	1.42	1.05	0.99	0.89	0.49	3.1	0.53
Environmental Science	32	1.13	1.00	0.89	0.75	0.32	2.7	0.83
Film Studies	82	1.52	1.23	1.14	1.05	0.66	2.9	0.60
French	143	1.30	0.90	0.82	0.70	0.32	3.3	0.67
Geography	175	1.32	1.06	0.96	0.85	0.50	2.7	0.70
Geology	50	1.58	1.16	1.00	0.78	0.28	4.3	1.27
German	75	1.11	0.90	0.81	0.72	0.51	2.0	0.60
Graphics	39	1.89	1.24	0.95	0.75	0.15	5.8	1.63
General Studies	158	1.30	0.86	0.74	0.63	0.42	2.9	0.77
Health and Social Care (GNVQ)	64	2.09	1.58	1.40	1.21	0.63	4.9	1.23
History	182	1.38	1.00	0.88	0.78	0.34	3.5	0.73
ICT	99	1.31	1.01	0.90	0.79	0.44	2.9	0.73
IT (GNVQ)	38	1.65	1.40	1.27	1.06	0.56	3.6	1.13

Subject	No. of SFCs	Highest	75th %	Med.	25th %	Lowest	Grade difference	
							Highest–lowest	75th–25th
Leisure and Tourism (GNVQ)	91	1.86	1.43	1.30	1.20	0.64	4.1	0.77
Law	121	1.47	1.09	0.94	0.79	0.27	4.0	1.0
Mathematics	185	1.69	0.93	0.86	0.76	0.50	4.0	0.57
Further Mathematics	58	1.22	1.07	1.01	0.84	0.32	3.0	0.77
Media Studies	68	1.49	1.19	1.07	0.97	0.58	3.0	0.73
Music	68	1.29	1.05	0.96	0.87	0.35	3.1	0.60
Performing Arts	82	1.80	1.22	1.13	0.97	0.70	3.7	0.83
Physical Education	161	1.39	1.08	0.94	0.84	0.35	3.5	0.80
Philosophy	32	1.30	0.96	0.85	0.71	0.30	3.3	0.83
Photography	36	1.67	1.55	1.36	1.17	0.85	2.7	1.27
Physics	179	1.17	0.96	0.86	0.77	0.22	3.2	0.63
Politics	109	1.40	1.15	1.04	0.93	0.45	3.2	0.73
Psychology	183	1.59	1.13	0.98	0.86	0.51	3.6	0.90
Religious Studies	71	1.77	1.14	1.01	0.89	0.62	3.8	0.83
Science (GNVQ)	9	1.92	1.30	1.19	1.10	0.96	3.2	0.67
Sociology	176	1.68	1.18	1.08	0.93	0.59	3.6	0.83
Spanish	55	1.60	1.01	0.90	0.73	0.23	4.6	0.93
Textiles	26	2.08	1.39	1.17	0.85	0.43	5.5	1.80
Theatre Studies	111	1.35	1.06	0.90	0.79	0.45	3.0	0.90
Overall college value-added	**188**	**1.21**	**1.00**	**0.96**	**0.91**	**0.73**		

Figures

Figure 1. Proportion of students eligible for WP uplift by institutional type. Source: LSC (2001d)

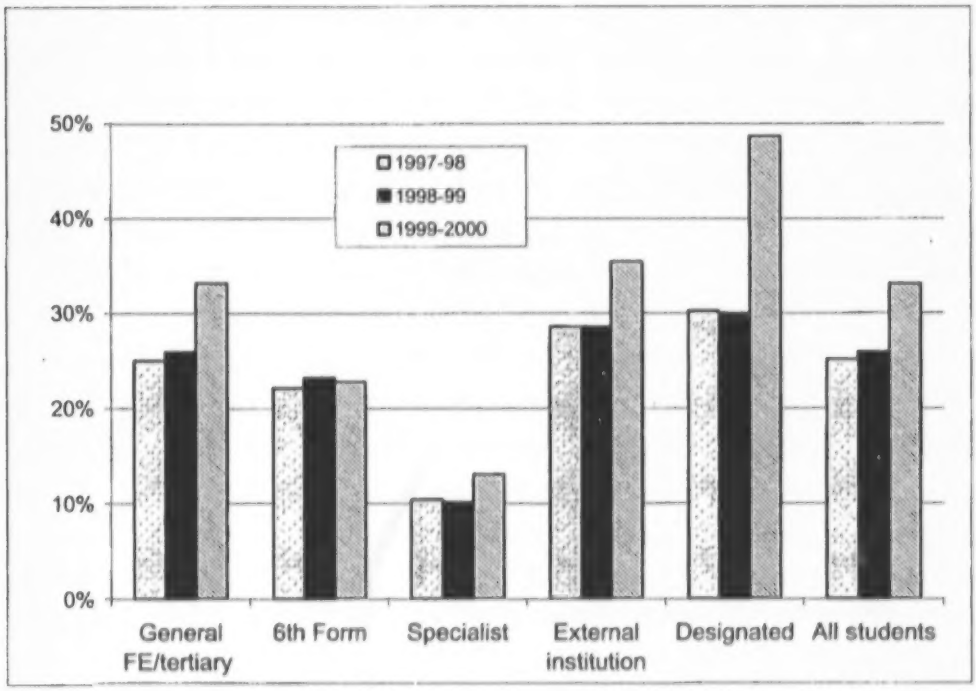


Figure 2. UCAS points per subject versus ALPS value-added index

($y = 0.0722x + 0.5639$ $R = 0.6284$ $R^2 = 0.3949$)

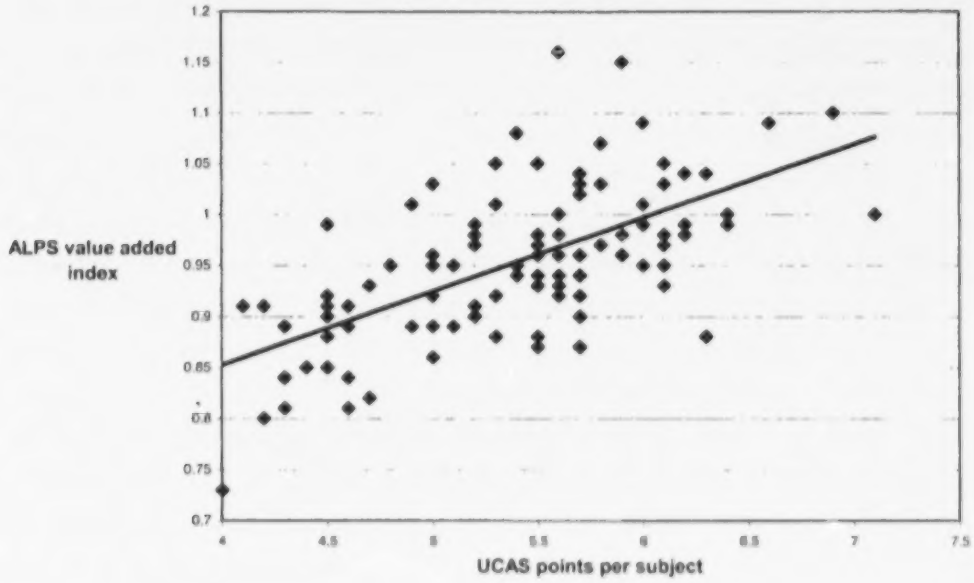


Figure 3. UCAS points per subject versus average GCSE score

($y = 1.2973x - 1.9743$ $R = 0.7061$ $R^2 = 0.4987$)

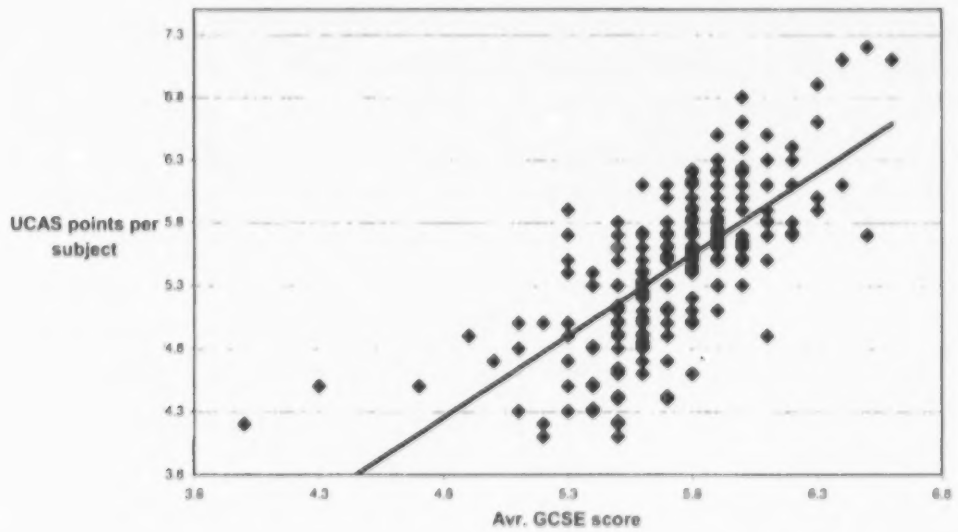


Figure 4. Average GCSE score versus ALPS value-added index

($y = 0.0239x + 0.8186$ $R = 0.0964$ $R^2 = 0.0093$)

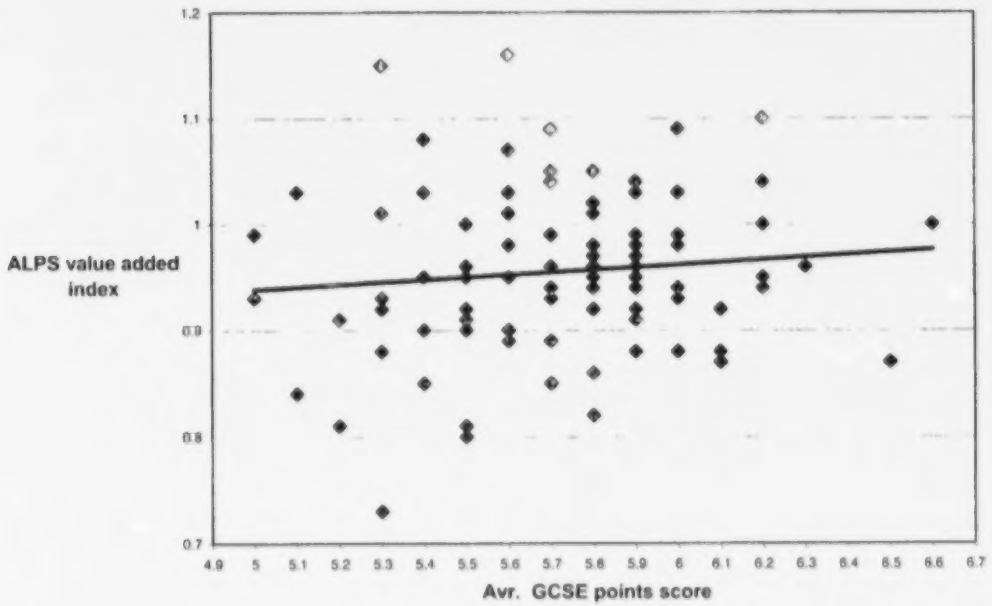


Figure 5. Full-time retention rate versus percentage of WP uplift students

($y = -2.2325x + 229.62$ $R = -0.3553$ $R^2 = 0.1263$)

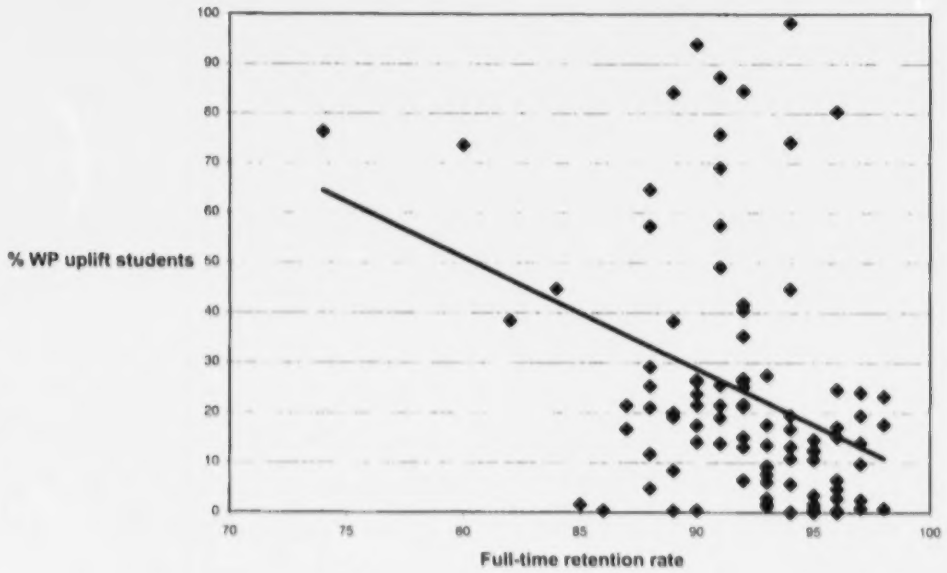


Figure 6. Long course achievement rate versus percentage of WP uplift students

($y = -1.1533x + 125.14$ $R = 0.3261$ $R^2 = 0.1064$)

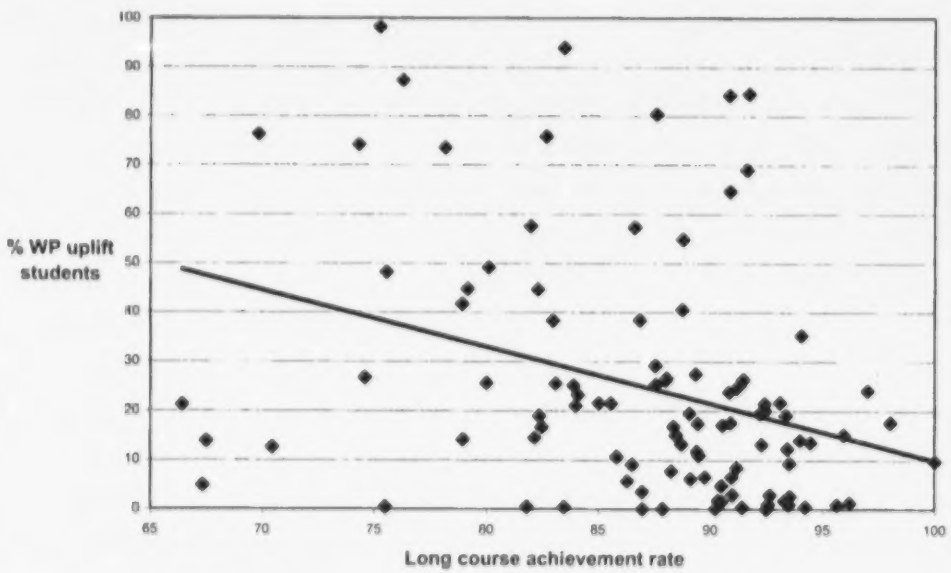


Figure 7. Average GCSE points score versus percentage of WP uplift students

(y = -45.19x + 281.92 R = 0.6210 R^2 = 0.3857)

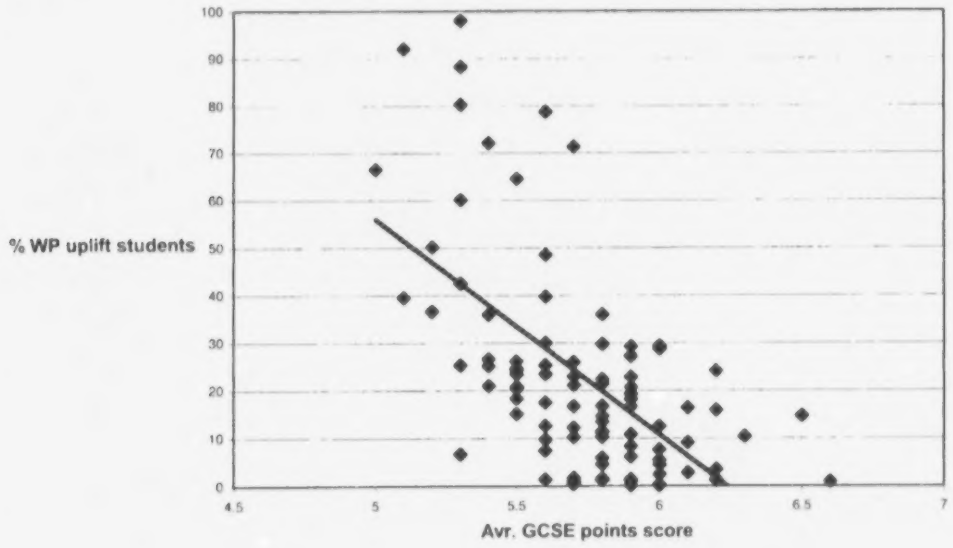
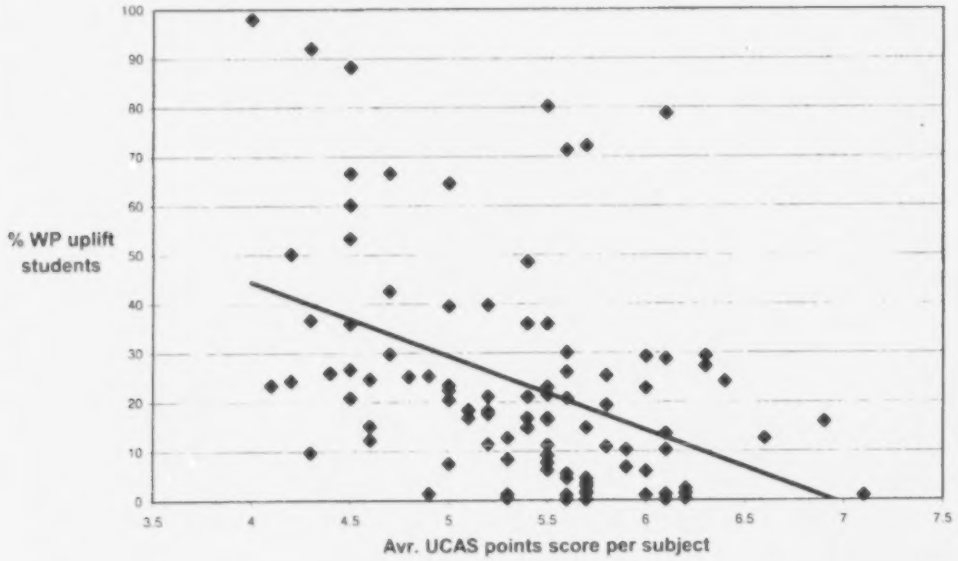


Figure 8. UCAS points score per subject versus percentage of WP uplift students

(y = -15.075x + 104.67 R = 0.4280 R^2 = 0.1832)



Appendix 1. Colleges participating in the project

Brief descriptions of the 12 colleges that participated in the primary research phase of the project are set out below. Table 1.1 provides some further statistics on the profile of the students enrolled at each, plus rates of retention and achievement and data on value-added. Table 1.2 displays a breakdown of grades awarded at the most recent inspection. In the tables, the colleges are listed in groups corresponding to the allocation of the four consultants.

College A

This West Midlands college is one of three SFCs in its local authority area. It is located adjacent to some relatively prosperous suburbs and some estates designated as 'New Deal Communities'. Students join the college from these localities, from the inner city and from central, northern and southern suburbs. The college recruits over 60% of its students from areas assessed as having social and economic disadvantages. In 2000/01, the college had on roll 1490 students, of whom some 87% are aged 16 to 18 and are studying full-time at the college. Asian and black students make up over 50% of the college population.

The college offers a wide range of provision at advanced level. Students can make their choice from 44 subjects. The most popular curriculum areas for full-time students are art and design, computing, English, humanities and the sciences. There are two AVCEs, one of which provides the option of a double award and both of which provide opportunities for the integration of vocational units into GCE A and AS level programmes. The main provision can be studied full-time or part-time at the college. A few adults study on A and AS level courses. Other adult students attend a range of courses in community venues, or information technology (IT) courses in the college in the evenings.

In its mission statement, the college aims 'to provide an educational experience of high quality for 16 to 19 year old advanced-level students from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds and to offer opportunities for members of the local community wishing to further their education'.

College B

The college serves an urban and suburban area in the South East with a population of around 75,000 but with poor transport links beyond. It was established in 1987 as part of a reorganisation of secondary education in the borough. The college now has around 1150 full-time and 2150 part-time enrolments. Over 90% of the former are aged 16–18. Though the college has few WP uplift students, the area it serves has higher unemployment and lower incomes than the averages for the south-east.

The college has five faculties: cultural studies and languages; business and mathematics; sciences; society and leisure; and performing and expressive arts. There are also three college units for lifelong learning, learning support, and vocational and professional courses.

Its mission states that 'the college will provide a challenging educational environment where everyone can achieve both individual and group potential. The college will continue to value and strive for quality provision building on the best traditions of the sixth form ethos'.

College C

The college is one of two SFCs that serve a large conurbation in the south-east, with a population of 300,000, and also draws from the surrounding region. It enrols around 1000 full-time and 1500 part-time students. In recent years there has been a steady growth in full-time numbers, which is expected to continue. The majority of the college's students aged 16–19 come from six partner secondary schools in the borough. The post-compulsory staying-on rate in the area is above the national average. Though much of the local economy is thriving, there are significant areas of deprivation, which include an Education Action Zone.

The college is committed to widening participation among individuals and groups who have traditionally not taken up opportunities in further education. The mission statement refers to the college's intention to be 'open to a broad community'.

College D

The college is a Roman Catholic SFC situated in Greater London. Around 1150 students are enrolled, almost all of whom are aged 16 to 18 and studying on full-time Level 3 courses – mainly A-level. Some students are on Level 2 courses and only a few on Level 1 courses. The college works closely with seven local partner schools – six of which are Roman Catholic and one Church of England – though it attracts students from over 100 others, some at a considerable distance. Just over one-third of the students enrolled at the college come from the partner schools. Approximately 49% of the students enrolled are Catholic; the gradual fall in the number of Catholic students in recent years reflects the intake of pupils of other denominations and faiths in the six Catholic partner schools.

The college's mission states that the college is 'dedicated to the education and development of the whole person, so that all students can realise their full potential'.

The college attracts students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and is usually over-subscribed with students wishing to enrol. A majority of the students at

the college come from ethnic minority groups. The college is situated in an area of unemployment and deprivation.

College E

This Greater London SFC is located in the same borough as another SFC, a large general FE college and three schools with sixth forms. It serves one of the most deprived areas in the country. The LSC classifies the relative deprivation of students at the college as 'very high'. The bulk of the enrolments come from ethnic minority groups. The educational achievements of Year 11 pupils from local schools are low compared with national averages.

The college enrols over 1400 students aged 16 to 18 and some 700 aged 19 or over. Many of the adult students attend part-time courses in ESOL, either during the day or in the evening at the college or at one of the two outreach centres. The main college is located on a single campus, where a major building programme has recently been completed, providing new accommodation and improved access for people with physical disabilities.

The college's mission is 'to provide excellent and inclusive education for school-leavers and to promote lifelong learning for all'. Promotion of inclusive education and widening the participation rates of the local community in further education are strongly reflected in the college's strategic objectives and range of courses.

College F

The college is located in a Greater London borough with high levels of deprivation. It was established in 1986 as part of a secondary education reorganisation. There is another SFC in the area, as well as a general FE college and a number of schools with sixth forms. The college is located on a single site. There have been recent improvements to facilities and further major building work is being undertaken. The college serves a wide catchment area, almost half its students coming from outside the borough. The student population is ethnically diverse, with the bulk of enrolments drawn from ethnic minority backgrounds. There are more female students (55%) than male.

Student numbers have increased over recent years and now number around 1500. Further expansion is planned. There is no provision aimed specifically at adults, although a few young people do remain at the college beyond the age of 19.

The college provides courses in 31 subjects at GCE AS and A-level. Courses leading to AVCEs are provided in five areas. Courses leading to GNVQs at intermediate level are also provided in the same areas. There are also two GNVQ courses at foundation level. There is a small amount of provision in ESOL. The college provides GCSE courses in mathematics and English. All advanced level students take a GCE A-level course in general studies.

The college is strongly committed to social inclusiveness and this is reflected in all its work. It sees itself as a provider of courses for students aged 16 to 19 and does not plan to run courses for adults. The college's pursuit of equality of opportunity is a central feature of its activity.

College G

Within the borough of this Greater London college, there is a marked difference between some areas that are prosperous and others that are deprived. Two wards are among the most deprived in Britain. The college has expanded its provision to meet the needs of the local community, particularly to help widen the participation of adults in education. It aims to cater for students of all abilities, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Just under half the enrolments are drawn from ethnic minority groups. There is also one other SFC in the borough.

Around 1800 students are enrolled, of whom 1300 are aged 16 to 18. The college offers a broad range of courses to meet a wide variety of learning needs. Full-time programmes include three foundation level GNVQ courses, six intermediate GNVQ courses, eight AVCE courses, 34 GCE A/AS level courses; GCSEs in mathematics and English, and a pre-GCSE course in mathematics. At advanced level (Level 3), one-third of full-time students were on AVCE courses and two-thirds on GCE courses, though many combine AVCE and GCE study. The college also offers evening classes, mostly in ICT but also NVQ courses at Level 1 in cleaning and support services, and at Levels 2 and 3 in early years education.

The mission of the college is to be 'a leading provider of a quality educational service to those from a variety of backgrounds and activities who wish to continue education and training after the age of 16'. It endeavours to ensure that its provision is educationally and socially inclusive and meets the needs of its students. Part-time courses have been developed for adults from the local areas, a nearby Education Action Zone and those in basic service occupations in the wider area. The college has established links with the local community through which it has raised its profile and attracted more young people to participate in post-compulsory education. There is good support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for speakers of other languages.

College H

The college is Roman Catholic, and is situated in a Greater London borough with a population of 213,000, but drawing students from 46 parishes across 14 London boroughs and neighbouring counties. It has two single-sex partner schools. Though parts of the borough are significantly less affluent than

others, the local economy is generally buoyant, and unemployment rates are below the average for the region.

Enrolments total around 800 students, the large majority attending full-time. About one-third are from the partner schools, one-third from other schools in the borough, and the remainder from schools outside. Just under half the students are Roman Catholic, and there is a significant minority from the Hindu faith. Over 90% of students are on A-level or AVCE programmes. There is also some vocational provision at Levels 1 and 2 and a small number of evening courses for adults.

The college's mission was revised in 2000 following consultation with representatives from all sections of the college community. It states that the college is committed to the personal and spiritual growth of all its members based on Christian values, academic excellence and high quality pastoral care.

College I

This North-Eastern college is one of two SFCs established in 1973 as part of the reorganisation of post-16 education in its borough, from which it takes almost all of its students. It enrols around 900 full-time students recruited from 11 local 11–16 schools. The borough includes two 11–18 maintained schools, another SFC and a general FE college. The area served spans a range of relative prosperity, including some pockets of high deprivation. The ethnic minority population is small.

GCE A-level and AS level courses are offered in science, mathematics, computing and ICT, business, art and design and performing arts, English, modern foreign languages, social sciences and a range of humanities subjects. There is also a GCSE programme. Also offered are double and single AVCEs in business studies, health and social care, ICT, and travel and tourism, and a BTEC National Diploma in sport science. These courses are followed by a significant number of students at the college, and in many cases are combined successfully with AS and A-levels. The college has a small adult programme with a strong focus on ICT. Some adult education courses are provided in collaboration with the borough's Adult Education Service, a local university, and with a private company.

The college recruits around a quarter of its students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Curriculum planning aims to take full account of students' backgrounds. Adult learners form a relatively small group within the college; an adult development officer has recently been appointed to review this provision. The support by the whole college community for the small number of students with physical disabilities is impressive.

College J

The college was established in 1976 as an open-access SFC on the site of a former grammar school. There are two other SFCs within the area, plus a number of schools with sixth forms. The college is situated a mile from the centre of an East Midlands conurbation, with a population of around 300,000, almost a third of whom belong to ethnic minority groups. The area served spans a wide range of prosperity, with pockets of high deprivation. Some parts have post-compulsory staying-on rates well below the national average.

Enrolments are around 900 (720 full-time), mainly 16–19 year olds. Well over three-quarters come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Over 50% are drawn from deprived areas, a significantly higher proportion than any other college in the borough. Provision consists of a range of A-level and GCSE courses, plus vocational programmes at Levels 1–3. There is some customised training for local employers and an IT programme for adults, which together account for most of the part-time students. A significant proportion of students enrolled arrive at college with prior attainment that is below the national average.

The college mission was clarified and restated in the late 1990s, following the appointment of a new principal. The college aims to:

- equip students with useful skills and relevant qualifications
- value the potential of academic and vocational education to enrich lives
- promote achievement in a spirit of responsibility, partnership and cooperation
- welcome students from all backgrounds to a lively multicultural community
- provide a secure yet challenging learning and social environment.

College K

The college is one of two SFCs situated in a large conurbation in the Yorkshire and Humberside region. There is also a large general FE college in the same borough, plus two 11–18 schools. The college has nine partner schools, and is an associate college of a local university. The population served is around 200,000, with a significant number of students being drawn from distant rural communities. The ethnic minority population is very small. Local unemployment is above the regional average, and the college draws around half its students from deprived areas. Post-16 participation is below regional and national averages, as is the attainment of school-leavers. There is an Education Action Zone in the area.

Enrolments total some 850 full-time students and 600 part-time, and the trend in recruitment is steadily upwards. The college offers a range of A-level and GCSE subjects, plus AVCEs and NVQs at Levels 2 and 3. CGLI, RSA and Open College qualifications are also available. Some courses are offered at community centres, local employment centres and on employers' premises.

The college has an open-access policy, and has been involved in a variety of collaborative initiatives designed to widen participation. Its mission was revised about 5 years ago. The college is now committed to:

- provide high quality education
- serve the community
- enable the fulfilment of individual potential.

College L

The college was established around 25 years ago on the site of a former grammar school. There are two other SFCs within the area, plus a number of schools with sixth forms. The college is situated not far from the centre of an East Midlands conurbation, with a population of around 300,000, almost a third of whom belong to ethnic minority groups. The area served spans a wide range of prosperity, with pockets of high deprivation. Some parts have post-compulsory staying-on rates well below the national average.

Full-time enrolments are around 1500, nearly all 16–19 year olds. In addition, over 1000 students aged over 19 are enrolled at the college's two Advanced Teleworking centres. Around a quarter of students come from deprived areas, and almost half are from ethnic minority groups. Provision for full-time students is predominantly in the area of A-levels and AVCEs. The college also offers extensive programmes of guidance, additional studies and sport. In addition, it has developed a wide range of international links and exchanges.

The mission statement and associated aims were reviewed and clarified some 5 years ago. The college now aims to 'provide challenge, encouragement and support for students in order to maximise their achievements'.

Appendix 2. Checklist for consultant visits to colleges

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
1. Background, mission and ethos		
Principal Senior Curriculum Manager	1.1 Are there particular characteristics of the catchment area that the college serves, and its student profile (relative deprivation; competition from other providers; etc), which the college believes have a significant influence on retention and achievement rates?	Strategic plan/development plans Inspection reports
	1.2 Are there particular characteristics of the ethos and mission of the college that have implications for retention and achievement (eg recruitment of students with no family tradition of achievement at Level 3; literacy problems; etc)? What challenges does this pose and how do you respond?	Mission statement/prospectus Inspection reports
	1.3 How and to what extent does the improvement/maintenance of retention and achievement feature in the college's strategic and development plans?	Strategic plan/development plans
	1.4 To what extent has the college been involved in national projects/initiatives that seek to enhance student achievement? What impact have they had on the college?	Documentation on relevant initiatives
Principal Senior Curriculum Manager Staff Development Manager	1.5 How does the staffing profile of the college impinge on student achievement? (length of service; background; morale; etc)	Organisation chart

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
2. College-wide strategies for raising/maintaining achievement		
Principal Senior Curriculum Manager	2.1 Are achievement rates a major concern of the governing body and senior management team?	Minutes of senior management team and governors' meetings
	2.2 Is there a college-wide strategy for improving/maintaining achievement?	College policy/strategy statement
Principal Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Teaching staff	2.3 Is this strategy communicated effectively to managers and staff?	College bulletins/newsletters
Principal Senior Curriculum Manager	2.4 How did the college determine its achievement benchmarks?	Benchmarking data and targets
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Teaching staff	2.5 What information and data concerning achievement rates, and strategies for their improvement/maintenance, was/is made use of in determining and implementing relevant strategies?	Achievement documentation
	2.6 Are there specific strategies that have proved particularly effective or ineffective?	

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
3. Effective processes for appropriate recruitment, placement onto courses and induction		
Marketing Manager Student Services Manager Student representatives	3.1 Does pre-enrolment information provide students with appropriate and accurate information about the college and the requirements of the subjects/courses and qualifications concerned? How do you know that the information is appropriate?	Prospectus Subject/course leaflets Student surveys
	3.2 How do you use feedback obtained to influence future provision?	
Senior Curriculum Manager Manager responsible for admissions Quality Assurance Manager Curriculum managers Student representatives	3.3 How does the college's admissions policy seek to further student achievement? What is the evidence that the policy is appropriate?	College admissions policy and guidance documentation
	3.4 In what way does the relationship with feeder schools impact upon the student profile on entry?	
	3.5 Are there effective mechanisms for ensuring that students select appropriate subjects/courses? • What happens in the event of disagreement with a student's preference? • Are any special steps taken in respect of subjects/courses where there is evidence of worse than average results/higher than average drop-out and failure rates? • Is there any evidence of mismatches between students' expectations and the actual requirements of a subject/course and, if so, what action has been taken?	

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Student Services Manager Student representatives	3.6 Do students have an induction programme that provides an effective introduction to the requirements of college and subjects/courses?	Summaries of student feedback Quality assurance review reports
	3.7 What steps are taken to identify potential problems at induction, and to take action (including facilitating appropriate subject/course transfers; taking proactive steps to facilitate remedial teaching/learning; confronting issues of motivation; etc)?	Induction programme documentation (sample)

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
4. Curriculum strategies that take account of the need to improve and maintain achievement		
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers	4.1 How and to what extent does the design of the curriculum take account of goals for the improvement/maintenance of retention and achievement (mix of level and type of course, etc)?	Subject/course review documentation Inspection reports
	4.2 What has been the impact on achievement of Curriculum 2000?	
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Subject/course team leaders Staff Development Manager	4.3 In response to concerns about retention and achievement, what examples are there of new subjects/courses and new approaches to curriculum delivery, and of withdrawal from inappropriate and ineffective areas of provision?	Academic Board minutes Staff development programme
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Subject/course team leaders Staff Development Manager Teaching staff	4.4 To what extent do curriculum structures and organisation reflect individual differences in students' abilities and learning needs?	Inspection report
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Subject/course team leaders Staff Development Manager	4.5 How does the structure of the timetable seek to assist student achievement? What is the evidence that it succeeds?	Timetable and timetable review documentation

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
Staff Development Manager Teaching staff Students	4.6 What are the responsibilities and involvement of curriculum managers in improving/maintaining retention and achievement?	Examples of curriculum managers' appraisal objectives Examples of subject/course review documentation

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Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
5. Tutorial systems and other support aimed at assisting students to maximise their achievement		
Senior Curriculum Manager Tutors Student Services Manager Students	5.1 What kind of tutorial arrangements exist? How much time within them is given to the consideration of individual student progress in their course?	Tutorial policy statement/programme Inspection report
	5.2 How do you know that these arrangements are appropriate?	
Senior Curriculum Manager Tutors Students	5.3 To what extent are ALIS or ALPS value-added approaches being used with individual students to set and review target minimum grades, monitor and action plan progress towards their achievement, and inform the management of teaching and of the curriculum? How are targets set – for individual students and for subjects/courses? How is progress monitored and reviewed, and remedial action taken?	Value-added system policy and records
Senior Curriculum Manager Tutors Student Services Manager Students	5.4 Is there an adequate balance and appropriate links between tutorial support for academic progress, and pastoral care, including support from Student Services?	Documentation on tutorial system and Student Services

Students	5.5 Do you feel valued and treated as an individual? Can you readily get advice and help from teachers? Are you happy that the teaching you receive is supporting you to obtain your qualifications?	Oral evidence from interviewees
	5.6 What targets have you got for exam grades? How were they set? Do you feel they are realistic and helpful to you? How do you know?	
Students Curriculum managers as appropriate	5.7 What steps are taken to address the particular needs of students from backgrounds with less tradition of qualification at Level 3 and above? What are the particular challenges that these students present for teaching and learning? How do you respond and how effectively?	Policy documents
Staff Development Manager	5.8 What staff development activities have been undertaken aimed at improving the quality of tutorial support for academic progress?	Staff development policy/programme
Staff Development Manager	5.9 Which of these activities were particularly successful or unsuccessful?	
Senior Curriculum Manager	5.10 How is the overall resourcing of support for student achievement determined.? What evidence exists that resources allocation is appropriate?	Budget review documentation

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
6. Culture of continual improvement in teaching and pedagogy		
Senior Curriculum Manager Curriculum managers Subject/course team leaders Staff Development Manager Teaching staff	6.1 What subject/course review mechanisms exist?	Subject/course review documentation Academic Board documentation
	6.2 How do you use the information from the reviews to feed back into the system?	
	6.3 In addition to the tutorial system, what other mechanisms exist for the academic support of students? What is the evidence for their effectiveness?	
	6.4 What steps have been taken to adjust teaching/learning strategies so as to support student achievement?	Subject/course review documentation Academic Board documentation Staff development plan/programme
	6.5 To what extent are staff involved in action groups aimed at improving/maintaining retention and achievement?	Retention and achievement action plan documentation
	6.6 Is there a system for regular observation of teaching/learning, aimed at identifying developmental needs?	Teaching observation scheme documentation
	6.7 What mechanisms exist for associated staff development, including arrangements for sharing effective practice? What is the evidence for their effectiveness?	Staff development plan/programme

Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
Teaching staff	6.8 Do you feel valued by senior staff? Do you feel you have the resources to do your job in the classroom?	Oral evidence from interviewees
	6.9 Are you given targets for the achievement of your students? If so, how are they set? Do you think they are realistic and helpful? Are students at the college performing as well as they should? How do you know?	

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Factors/Interviewee(s)	**Indicators** (potential influences on student retention and achievement)	**Evidence** (potential documentation to back up views of interviewees)
7. Effective monitoring, evaluation and follow-up		
Senior Curriculum Manager MIS Manager Curriculum managers Course team leaders Teaching staff	7.1 Is accurate and timely information available, including via the college's MIS, allowing all concerned to identify potential problems at an early enough stage?	Examples of regularly disseminated documentation
	7.2 What steps are taken to ensure early and effective follow-up of absence and backlogs/failure in coursework/assessments?	College policy documentation on absence and remedial support
	7.3 What mechanisms exist to review and act upon courses so as to improve/maintain their student achievement, to learn from those with above average achievement, and to set achievement targets for the future?	Subject/course review documentation Academic Board documentation
Senior Curriculum Manager MIS Manager Curriculum managers Course team leaders Teaching staff Students	7.4 How are learners involved in review?	Student surveys

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